

The background of the cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman in 19th-century attire. The man, on the right, is wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a patterned waistcoat. He is looking down at the woman with a serious expression. The woman, on the left, is wearing a purple lace dress and is looking up at him. They are in a close embrace. In the background, there is a window with blue curtains and a chandelier with lit candles.

A  
PRIDE & PREJUDICE  
*SENSUAL*  
VARIATION

# CONCERTO

CORA ASTON

# Concerto

A Pride & Prejudice Sensual Variation

Cora Aston

*A Longbourn Lady*

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## Excerpt

*"Miss Elizabeth."*

*No. No, he could not have deliberately followed her.*

*No coward, she turned as Darcy exited the townhouse almost, one might suppose, on her heels.*

*"Miss Benichou," she corrected softly. Evenly.*

*The streetlamp cast his face in brief relief as he approached, slowing his steps as he neared. Nearby a horse snorted, pawing at the ground as if the poor beast sensed their tension.*

*"A ridiculous pretense." He looked down at her, the aristocratic lines of his face severe under moonlight, honed with the last several years of maturity.*

*And his eyes. . .the deep, dark, icy blue. . .how could they be so cold but burn so bright?*

*Hesitance fled. "It might seem so for one blessed with your birth."*

*"Ridiculous because your true name is sufficient. Why pretend to be a Frenchwoman?"*

*"I am not. I am pretending to be an Englishwoman pretending to be a Frenchwoman. It is an amusement."*

*He stared at her. "That is incomprehensible."*

*"Ladies understand."*

*"I have heard of Elise Benichou. I have heard—" he bit off his words. "You have been under my nose for so long, and I did not even know it. My sister thinks me a fool."*

*Her anger turned to bafflement. "A fool for what? What does it matter what name I use? We are nothing to each other."*

*"Is that what you think?" He smiled, slow and exquisite, and took a step forward. Close, close enough to reach out and cup her cheek, fingers warm against her skin. "I tried to convince myself of that years ago. I tried for a long while. When I finally gave up the pretense, you had vanished."*

*His smile vanished, eyes narrowing. His fingers shifted, hand sliding around to the back of her neck. "And now I know why."*

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## Chapter 1

“Are you attending Lady Cresilde’s musicale?” Georgiana asked, sipping her port.

Because it was just the two of them for dinner, the Darcy siblings dispensed with the usual protocols. Instead, his sister joined him in his study for port rather than retiring alone to read or play with her cards.

He stared into his own glass, frowning. “I have work to do.” Evidenced by the mess of papers on his desk, pushed aside just enough to allow for a few moments’ respite.

“You always work. I am unimpressed with your excuse. Come, you must attend. This rising talent, Miss Elise Benichou, is to play.”

“Ah. By any chance, is this the true reason you convinced me to abandon Pemberley for the season?”

She grinned. “Not the season. Just for this occasion, though Miss Benichou is quite fashionable this year. I believe she will be a guest of most of the ton.”

Darcy grimaced. He begrudged no artist a living, but he did not look forward to Georgiana’s attempt to dragoon him into participating in an activity that was considered fashionable. He avoided such indignities whenever possible.

“You will owe me if I accompany you.”

“I’ll check my ledger. I am certain you owe me.”

Darcy snorted as she exited, wishing not for the first time he had found a wife whose personality suited him as well as his sister’s. There had been a time—but that had not come to pass, and the long years since had taught him that if ever again he was given a chance, he would grasp it with both hands. He would never allow his pride to stand in the way of happiness. For what did he have now?

Darcy glanced around his study. Overflowing with books, the fire flickered low, work enough to fill his mind and hours with activity. But no children, no family other than Georgiana.

He stared into the fire, pushing the papers further away, and realised the ennui he felt was a biting loneliness. And what was loneliness except the absence of love? Such a shame it had taken all these years to unbend enough to learn this lesson.

Even after ten years of study and the brazen start of her career as a fashionable pianist for the ton, Elizabeth's nerves still troubled her before a performance. In these times she always doubted her plan to use her skills to build a nest egg. Who did she think she was, some great musical genius? But she could not give into her inner critic. She loved her sister and brother-in-law and their children, but Jane well knew that being the poor maiden aunt was not the life Elizabeth wanted for herself long term.

Drastic problems were never solved by less than drastic measures.

"Miss Benichou," Lady Cresilde trilled, kissing the air over both her cheeks. "We are so delighted you could join us."

"How could I not?" Elizabeth replied with a smile. "Your gatherings are legendary; I would not dare refuse."

As if she would dare refuse, regardless. It suited society, and Elizabeth, to pretend she did not perform for the money. Money was handled by stewards and secretaries, fees never discussed by Elizabeth and the nobles or wealthy patrons who hired her. The pretence did not bother her one whit. The extra illusory layer between her and any financial discussions kept her reputation from devolving into that of a poor, working artist. Her stage name was a thin veneer, easily cracked—she had not put much effort into concealing her true name and thus had, on occasion over the years, run into patrons while with her friends or family.

Lady Cresilde escorted Elizabeth to the piano. "I hope it meets with your approval."

She knew it would, for she had arrived earlier that afternoon to ensure it was properly tuned. Elizabeth's gloved hand ran over the warm, silky wood. "It is a lovely creature, Lady Cresilde. Not an Adenauer, but the next best thing to it. I am envious."

Her thin mouth pursed. "It has been in my family for, oh, years. Not as good as an Adenauer, you say?"

Elizabeth took a seat, smoothing her gown underneath her thighs. No one knew of her family connection to her brother-in-law, Robert Adenauer, a renowned pianist turned piano maker, and it would say that way.

"No, no, it really is quite an exquisite instrument. Robert cannot compete with the grandeur of these ancient lovelies. They create their pianos to order, crafted to match the taste and personality of the owner, and the sound. . .perfecto. But quite expensive. No, no, such an expense is not necessary when one already possess something of this quality."

Lady Cresilde was hooked, Elizabeth could see. Robert made almost a performance of the initial meeting with a patron, crafting an art out of ensuring they felt truly coddled.



She watched Cresilde under her lashes, fingers ghosting over the white keys. Orders were low this month. If Elizabeth secured the Marchioness, then more commissions would follow. She, Jane, and Jane's husband lived comfortably, but their comfort was always one set of keys away from discomfort. Elizabeth helped provide for the household as well as set aside money for her eventual plans. Considering what those plans actually were always elicited an unfurling of loneliness. For once she had the money to live and travel independently as a modestly well-off gentlewoman—what then? She had no one besides her sisters, all scattered with their own lives. Their own husbands and children, their households and neighbours, and. . . whom did Elizabeth have?

Wrenching her mind away from oncoming melancholy, she focused on Lady Cresilde's next words.

"Do you perchance know this Mr Adenauer?"

*Oh, you naïve woman*, Elizabeth thought. "I have made his acquaintance. It pleases me to sometimes test the tone of his newest creations. To be the first to ever touch fingertips to the keys." She placed the tips of one gloved hand delicately on the piano, the other pressed to her bosom. "I feel. . .this will seem dramatic. . .but I almost feel close with God. Such magnificence. But so rare to test a piano, he only takes commissions from very select clientele. Those he knows will absolutely appreciate his little darlings. Only individuals of the highest calibre."

"I see, I see. Perhaps. . .if you are certain that the Adenauer pianos are so exclusive. . .well, I am a personal friend of the Lord Lockhart's wife. Perhaps. . ."

The wife of an Earl. Elizabeth allowed her expression to remain innocently bland for a long moment, then widened her eyes.

"Oh. Oh! An introduction?" Her head tilted toward Cresilde, and she glanced around conspiratorially. "I. . .believe I can be prevailed upon. The elegance of this room, the company. I am certain I could convince him that you were just the right caretaker for one of his darlings. I cannot guarantee it, of course. He is an artist, and you understand how temperamental they can be."

Lady Cresilde nodded sagely. "Of course. Do your best, my dear. I shall be grateful."

Elizabeth waited until the guests drifted into the music room, taking seats in pairs and solos. Cresilde introduced Elizabeth and when it was time, she shut out the hum of slowly dying conversation and turned to her instrument.

Lady Cresilde's guests listened attentively as Elizabeth played, or as attentively as an audience at such a gathering ever did. Some sat politely only because the appreciation of music was considered a sign

of good breeding. Others truly enjoyed the art.

More like a craft. She had not been a proficient player until years ago, fueled by the humiliation of her poor performance in front of Lady Catherine. At the time, she had laughed her inadequacy off, but after the days and weeks that followed. . .her lack of accomplishment at the piano became the symbol for all that was lacking in her life. Inheritance, suitors, true refinement.

Pride, as well as circumstances, had forced her to take this path. A path that had once seemed so adventurous, so defiant.

She was on her second piece when a slight tremble danced through her fingers and disturbed the notes, imperceptible unless one was a true connoisseur of music. A quality in the air, like a sudden inhalation of breath or the brief but sharp focus of a stranger's attention, thrummed her finely honed instincts.

Elizabeth ended with a flourish and rose, an atavistic shiver caressing the back of her neck. She curtsied as the room applauded—there, again, that something in the air that she ignored with will until it faded, then drifted back to her thoughts.

She might have become a governess, but Elizabeth Bennet was not fated to fade away shut up in a grey nursery educating spoilt daughters of the gentry.

No, she desired the rush in her blood every time she conquered her fear and sat to play. The exultation as notes poured from her fingertips—the result of hard work and hidden talents. Her gowns, less sumptuous than the dress of the ton, but certainly of higher quality she had ever possessed growing up, she considered an expense of her trade. She must look the part, after all. Could she give up the fashions for a governess' sombre attire?

Perhaps, once. . .but not now that she had tasted the brush of adulation, the heady independence of earning an income.

And yet, as she smiled at the crowd, underneath the satisfaction of another well done set, her heart lay leaden in her breast. With each performance, the thrill in her blood lessened. She feared that soon these evenings would feel as empty and pointless as teaching children their arithmetic.

She wanted more, but she was unable to pinpoint what the more was. *Oh, Elizabeth*, she sighed to herself. *Be grateful for what you have. Do not pine for something lost, or not destined to be.*

Especially when the memory of what was lost stung like a thorn in her side. She pushed aside those flashes of thoughts, of regret. Life would have been no better, surely.

There it was again: the sharpness in the air, a tingle dancing over her skin as if hidden eyes scrutinized her person. This time she did not shy away.

Elizabeth surveyed the crowd as she left her place, refusing to dismiss her fancifulness. She would take a glass of punch, mingle for a few minutes to preserve the polite fiction that she was simply a talented guest and not in trade, and then slip away, her purpose for the evening done. Tomorrow she would prospect for clients under the guise of making calls and taking a walk in the most fashionable parks. At some point some gentlewoman would remark on her performance and invite her to another gathering to play and so on and so forth.

Perhaps it was not the life she truly desired, but it was a life, and she was blessed to possess a certain amount of cleverly wrested agency unheard of for an unmarried gentlewoman.

The tingle in the air rose up and slapped her in the face.

“This is marvelous!” a feminine voice exclaimed. “I did not know it was you, Miss Elizabeth.”

## Chapter 2

Elizabeth froze, the sweet albeit matured tones of the voice striking a familiar chord. She knew that voice. Knew it in her bones.

Turning slowly, she met the peony blue eyes of Georgiana Darcy, a woman she had not seen since. . .

. . .and behind Georgiana. . .

“Elizabeth,” he said, voice the same reserved but steely timbre, darkened with time.

The voice seized her heart and took her mind back to those heady days; her body followed. It shocked her into frozen silence for the barest of moments, how fiercely her body responded. Thighs clenching, chest rising with a swiftly inhaled breath and the sudden, staccato beat of her previously placid heart.

It was as if her body remembered, after all this time, how he had played her with his fingertips and kisses. Never going beyond that final point of no return but training her to crave his touch. He, the maestro, and she, the instrument.

“Miss Darcy,” Elizabeth said and curtsied. “How delightful to see you again.”

Her voice remained modulated, nothing giving away the shock of seeing Fitzwilliam Darcy again. She should have been an actress, though some skill in prevarication was required in order to play for the ton night after night and pretend as if it was not employment.

He had called her Elizabeth. She met his eyes and knew the familiarity was no slip of the tongue. He took a single step forward, then stopped, broad shoulders as stiff and straight as ever. His gaze burned, a brief flicker before the shutters of his soul slammed down and he turned, walking away.

“Ah,” Georgiana said, a hint of amusement in her tone as she glanced over her shoulder at her retreating brother, then turned back to Elizabeth. “Men are cowards.”

Elizabeth gaped, then snapped her mouth closed. “What a fascinating observation.”

Georgiana laughed. “I never imagined I would meet you here. I have thought of you often over the years.”

“I have thought of you as well.” It was a safe enough admission, and true. She smiled warmly. “It is lovely to see you again.”

“And my brother?”

Elizabeth's smile dimmed under the weight of Georgiana's knowing look. She searched for a suitable reply, but Georgiana spoke.

"He told me everything, you know. He has never wed—I believe he still pines for you."

Was she still in reality? She had not fainted at her piano and hit her head and was now in a dream state, was she? How had they gone from the first greetings after ten years to pining. . . in a mere moment?

Darcy's sister sighed and took Elizabeth's elbow. "Come. I am always too forward, but I have found it is not worth the effort on most occasions to abridge my words. My brother says my conversation is frequently like jumping headlong into an icy lake instead of first dipping in one's toe."

They strolled through the crowd, Georgiana's grip a trap, her deceptively delicate fingers digging into Elizabeth's arm in a clear refusal to allow her prey to escape.

Elizabeth did not attempt to pull away after her first subtle try. She could not afford to make a scene or offend a Darcy. Especially not Georgiana Darcy, well known for her elegance and the house parties to which everyone clamoured eagerly for an invitation. Elizabeth had carefully avoided them for years—not all that difficult as their social circles rarely overlapped since Jane's marriage.

"I looked for you, you know," Georgiana said in her ear once they had cleared the last interruption.

Approaching the buffet table, Darcy's sister finally released Elizabeth in order that they might fill plates with bits of this and that. "Once it was clear his ennui would not pass, I searched, determined to mend the breach. But we could not find you."

"I—I do not understand."

The words made no sense—Miss Darcy spoke of incomprehensible things. Darcy had not truly loved her. Their mutual exhilaration at their battles, the novelty of her being the first woman to dismiss him, a certain mutual, physical compatibility. . . all those things might have convinced him he was in love.

But true love could not exist with stipulations.

Love her, want her, accept her. . . accept her family as well. Elizabeth would never be parted from Jane—though admittedly, Jane had never been the issue.

"I am not about in society as Elizabeth Bennet," she said, voice pitched only for Miss Darcy's ears.

"Clearly," was the dry reply. A flash of ire in blue eyes and then the younger woman sighed. "Elise Benichou. Clever. It was quite a shock to see you tonight. I wonder our paths have not crossed before."

Elizabeth's lips pursed. They moved away from the buffet table. "Like any artist I have had to work my way into the upper echelons of

society in which you mingle. Lady Cresilde is a coup for me.”

“I always did enjoy your bluntness,” Georgiana murmured. “You do not even attempt to pretend this is an amusing pursuit rather than employment.”

“And you do not disdain me for it.”

“Clearly why we are so well suited. I knew it years ago, but my daft brother. . .” she sighed. “He did not handle you well at all. I was sorely vexed.”

“Let us not speak of it. It is done, and no harm caused.”

“And where are my nieces and nephews who would have been born? Harm was indeed caused. Though I blame you as much as he. Still. . .he plans, and I plan, and I am a more proficient planner.”

“The blame is not all his,” Elizabeth heard herself say, then wished she had not spoken. But she had and must be true to her inner promptings. “I had—have—my pride as well.”

“Pride, yes. Always before a fall, is that not what they say?”

“Well, it is not quite the infamous ‘they’. . .”

“Yes, yes. Come, let us go chase down my brother.”

Elizabeth’s heels immediately scrambled to grip the floor, quite independent of her direction. Her mind and body were in one accord, however.

“I think not. I have no wish to discomfit Mr Darcy.”

“A little discomfit might jostle him out of this infernal rut he has been in,” was the edged reply. “I have never seen him turn tail and flee a woman before.”

Turn tail and flee had not quite been Elizabeth’s interpretation of his brief, searing look and very final silent condemnation. Presenting her his back and striding away after speaking her name and meeting her gaze was not quite a cut—but it was a clear signal.

“Miss Darcy.” Elizabeth spoke firmly. “While I appreciate your intentions, I must ask you not to intervene. Indeed, there is nothing to intervene with. Your brother merely attempted to spare us both an embarrassing polite conversation. As I have matured, I find I increasingly understand his disdain for conversation merely for the sake of public politeness.”

Georgiana glanced at her, not a break in her graceful stride. She smiled at another passing acquaintance and the skill to speak such cold, steely words through such sweetly curved lips. . .perhaps it was not Elizabeth who should have pursued the stage.

“Miss Elizabeth or Miss Benichou, whichever you prefer. While I appreciate your intentions, I must say—poppycock. You are as much a coward as Fitzwilliam. And I refuse to allow another decade to go past without the two of you reunited.”

Elizabeth wracked her mind for any way to extricate herself from

Miss Darcy's inexorable grip but there were too many eyes upon them, and too many of those eyes were potential patrons. Elizabeth survived by avoiding all breath of scandal. Her conduct and name must be above reproach to avoid any scrutiny of her admittedly thin veneer of respectability. She was tolerated only so long as she could insist she was simply a talented gentlewoman and the stipends she received a donation to the upkeep of her talent. Or whatever it was those she played for told themselves.

They were all of them ridiculous. All of them with these polite lies to cover truths that were horrible only to those with full bellies and extravagant shelters.

But yet. . .

"Miss Darcy, please."

Georgiana stopped. "But why? Why not break through this self-imposed barrier and pursue the spark you both know is present? Why not fight for happiness?"

Because there was no such thing as a happy ending. Because she still loved him and knew it after just seeing him again in that brief moment. Because her heart could not bear a second breaking.

And he despised her. Clearly.

Georgiana sighed. "If you will not acquiesce in this, then at least I must have your promise to play at my little tête-à-tête this week. Just a few friends of mine, cards, conversation, and some music to accompany would be lovely."

Elizabeth's heart softened. The younger woman's expression looked so dejected. "Of course, my dear. I would be delighted to attend you." And she might even be moved to lower her fee for the occasion. For friendship's sake.



The next time Georgiana was distracted by a mutual acquaintance, Elizabeth seized the opportunity and slipped away. Normally she might linger a little longer, but she judged her timing and fled, retrieving her wrap and flying out of the door to order a carriage.

"Miss Elizabeth."

No. No, he could not have deliberately followed her.

No coward, she turned as Darcy exited the townhouse almost, one might suppose, on her heels.

"Miss Benichou," she corrected softly. Evenly.

The streetlamp cast his face in brief relief as he approached, slowing his steps as he neared. Nearby a horse snorted, pawing at the ground as if the poor beast sensed their tension.

"A ridiculous pretense." He looked down at her, the aristocratic

lines of his face severe under moonlight, honed with the last several years of maturity.

And his eyes. . .the deep, dark, icy blue. . .how could they be so cold but burn so bright?

Hesitance fled. "It might seem so for one blessed with your birth."

"Ridiculous because your true name is sufficient. Why pretend to be a Frenchwoman?"

"I am not. I am pretending to be an Englishwoman pretending to be a Frenchwoman. It is an amusement."

He stared at her. "That is incomprehensible."

"Ladies understand."

"I have heard of Elise Benichou. I have heard—" he bit off his words. "You have been under my nose for so long, and I did not even know it. My sister thinks me a fool."

Her anger turned to bafflement. "A fool for what? What does it matter what name I use? We are nothing to each other."

"Is that what you think?" He smiled, slowly, exquisitely, and took a step forward. Close, close enough to reach out and cup her cheek, fingers warm against her skin. "I tried to convince myself of that years ago. I tried for a long while. When I finally gave up the pretense, you had vanished."

His smile vanished, eyes narrowing. His fingers shifted, hand sliding around to the back of her neck. "And now I know why."

She should pull away, do anything but stand here as if she were bespelled by the look in his eyes. If someone should come upon them.

..

"You fled. You said my name and then you turned away and—" she bit off the words. They revealed too much. She should not care.

"I needed the time to compose myself. It was not a rejection, Elizabeth. I dislike causing a scandal."

"And I am to believe you were so overcome with fiery emotion upon seeing me again that you cut me in public?" She hoped the scorn in her voice lashed him to the bone.

His face remained stony, though not his eyes. "Believe what I have told you."

Now she did attempt to pull away, but his hold tightened, fingers flexing against her neck. "Darcy. You—you must not touch me." Reluctantly, he released her. Elizabeth shook her head, hand twisting in her skirt. "I must go. It is late, and I am expected home."

"Now who is fleeing, Elizabeth?"

"There is nothing to flee, sir."

"Go then." He stepped back, out of the light of the streetlamp. "I know you now. I will find you."



## Chapter 3

What had she done?

Elizabeth sat hard upon her bench, hairbrush dangling in her fingers. Jane would be fast asleep at this time of night and it was unfair to wake her tired sister. The children would be up at an ungodly hour of the morning, bless their dear mother.

Standing, she padded to her desk to retrieve paper and ink. After muttering a few indelicate words, she sat and began the brief missive over again, this time without the telltale tremble marring the form of the letters.

She begged Miss Darcy's pardon and gracefully rescinded her acceptance of the engagement, pleading a prior commitment which her delight at seeing Miss Darcy had caused her to forget. It was doubtful Georgiana would believe such nonsense. But what could she say? That Darcy had all but threatened Elizabeth with—what? Some obscure form of vengeance for not having sat and waited prettily for him to decide to come sauntering back and make his apologies?

What did he want from her? She had been unable to place the look on his face, the tone in his voice. He did not seem like a man pining gently away for a lost love. No, he seemed more a dark, avenging angel.

Elizabeth snorted. Fitzwilliam Darcy was no angel, dark or no.

But he was a complication—if he determined to make her life difficult. He could very well have her barred from plying her genteel trade. She must handle him wisely, at least until he lost interest and drifted back into his own life.

Pausing, she tapped the pen against her mouth. Perhaps refusing his sister's invitation was not the best tactic. Would that be like waving a red flag in front of a bull? But perhaps. . . out of sight, out of mind? Lips pursed, she continued the letter, deciding on the latter course. Surely, he would forget all about her soon enough.

In the back of her mind, a little voice protested. She did not want him to forget about her. At all.

Closing her eyes, she set the pen down, forcing her emotions to settle. Even here in the peace of her bedroom and with an entire city between them, he affected her state of mind. The aftershocks of seeing him lingered, his face rising in her mind's eye.

There was a light tap on the door, and then Jane slipped in, a

shawl over her shoulders.

"I heard you come in," her elder sister said, tucking loose strands of dark gold hair behind her ear. She hesitated. "Is something wrong, Lizzy?"

Jane's ability to read Elizabeth's moods was often uncanny. "Why do you ask?"

"You usually putter about a bit after you return from an evening, and I heard no humming." Her lips quirked. "And you know it is when the children are the most quiet that they are up to the most mischief."

Elizabeth smiled, suppressing a laugh so as not to disturb anyone else. "You astonish me as always."

Thinking about what to say so she did not sound foolish, Elizabeth rose and returned to her vanity table. Jane took it from her and soon they were brushing hair just as if they were still girls.

"I encountered Georgiana and Fitzwilliam Darcy tonight," she said, rewarding Jane's patience.

Jane paused, the brush running through her hair still. "You have been so careful to avoid them."

"Yes, well, it was bound to happen sooner or later."

The brushing resumed. "So you saw him. Did you speak?"

Elizabeth inhaled, this time unable to hold back a quiet bark of laughter. "We spoke."

"Lizzy."

She turned, grabbing Jane's hands. "Jane, I never thought I would want to see him again. How he spoke about our sisters and mother—"

"Was justified, if ungentlemanly." Gentle blue eyes stared at her. "You know I did not agree with your decision to break the engagement. And now the girls are wed with their own families and the hurtful words of the past forgotten and you—" she stopped talking, pressing her lips together, then sighed. "I am so lucky to have my sister with me to be as a second mother to my children. But I wish you had had a husband and children of your own."

"I am happy."

"Content, perhaps. Even whole. But happy? I think not." Jane squeezed her hands. "So, what did Mr Darcy say?"

"I—at first he. . ." she paused to collect her thoughts, not wanting to misrepresent Darcy's words by either underestimating or adding to his meaning. "He said, or rather indicated, that he had searched for me after some time passed. But could not find me."

Jane looked thoughtful. "I married perhaps six months after you broke off the engagement, and we came to live in London with Robert. Collins was at Longbourn and the girls, already gone. If he went looking for you there—"

"Our cousin would have bent over backwards to tell Darcy where

we had gone.”

“But Charlotte would not have, thinking she protected you.”

And Charlotte, a woman who kept her own counsel, would not have told Elizabeth that Mr Darcy had called, if he had. She would have respected that Elizabeth insisted, despite even her counsel, that she no longer nursed affection or respect for Mr Darcy—and once the decision was made, it should not be revisited.

Elizabeth released Jane’s hands, rising to pace the room. “Even if he then came to London, he would have had no way of knowing where to look. And when I began playing for the ton, I used the name Elise Benichou, of course, and took care to stay out of his social circles to avoid any awkwardness.”

“To avoid,” her sister gently corrected her, “your own heart.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I thought that if we saw each other again and he gave me that cold, indifferent look of his, I could not bear it. I was a coward.”

Jane watched her. “What else did he say tonight? He searched for you back then, and now. . .?”

“I believe he plans on renewing our acquaintance. For what purpose, I do not know. Perhaps simply for closure if he was as affected as I by our final argument. It is hard to credit—so many years have passed.”

“He is not married.”

“No.”

“That is telling, Lizzy.”

“Telling only of his overweening standards. I swear listening to him and Miss Bingley prattle on about the proper accomplishments of young ladies was one of the most disagreeable days of life.”

Jane smiled faintly. “He was younger then. Hopefully his view of the world has matured. Do you think he means to seek you out. Will he call?”

“Certainly not.”

Her sister rose. “Well, then I think you have nothing to worry about, unless indeed you wish to see him again. Simply stay out of his path.”

“I accepted an invitation from Georgiana.”

“That is certainly not staying out of his path.”

“I mean to write a letter and make my regrets.”

“Elizabeth.” Faint disapproval in Jane’s expression matched her repressive tone.

“What? I had no time to think before I accepted.”

“Sleep deeply tonight, your dreams will have an answer for you. Perhaps the best course is to see him again and resolve whatever argument is still between you, to finally put his ghost to rest.”

The next morning, Darcy stared at the letter Georgiana had flung on his desk with a pointed look before exiting with a silent huff. She had not even bothered to berate him—he understood her silent command to rectify the situation immediately.

Elizabeth Bennet, unwed, a rising social phenom under the name Elise Benichou. The years had not aged her, only graced her with a patina of elegant maturity. She had grown into her dark beauty, her devil-may-care smile and mocking eyes seasoned with experience.

But the defiant girl lingered—he recognised her in the way this more contained creature surveyed the room. The occasional curl of her lip he remembered all too well, the quick flick of her lashes when eyeing some poor fool sideways. But she had learned to contain herself, much as he had learned to not be so uncaring of the feelings and opinions of those around him.

He had not understood until too late all those years ago. Had not realised that the woman who seemed so brashly defiant of the world and its norms hid a vulnerable, uncertain heart.

Looking back now, he cursed himself. Any fool would have seen it, but he had been worse than a fool. Of course, she had clung to her family, defended them with all her might. Cast adrift by the death of her father, the Bennet sisters were all they had left. Yet Elizabeth was far too uncalculating to have simply wed him for his fortune and the support he would be obliged to provide. How many occasions had she insisted a gentlewoman should wed for love and mutual respect or not at all? He had thought her ideals charming, if impractical.

No, she had taken his disdain of her mother and sisters to heart, recoiling from his poorly formulated, ill-timed request that she distance herself from them. Abandon them to their fate, though that was not what he had meant. But it was only after his heart had healed somewhat he was able to pick apart what went wrong during that encounter, untangle the skeins of their words and realise they were both fools.

Amusement, anger, and a growing anticipation brought him slowly to his feet to pace the room as he read and reread the brief missive, interpreting the careful tone of her words.

An elegant hand, her letters neat and feminine. Each word chosen to balance reserved warmth with sincere regret layered over a foundation of subtle dismissal.

“Elizabeth,” he said softly. “You have made the first move. Now it is my turn.”

## Chapter 4

Elizabeth rose two mornings later, ill refreshed and thus somewhat short of temper. Fortunately, the habits of years took over, and soon she was at her piano. She allowed the beauty and rigour of the art to soothe her, to take her mind away from restless musing. Soon, however, she was interrupted.

“Lizzy!” Jane entered the music room and stopped short, hands at her waist. She stared at Elizabeth. “You did not hear the carriage pull up.”

She had been practicing. Elizabeth rose, approaching the small window that was her attic music’s room only source of light and peered out onto the street below. A fine carriage sat at rest.

She turned. “Who has come to call?”

“Mr Darcy. Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Elizabeth reared back, shock taking momentary control of her composure. Of all the responses to the letter sent to Miss Darcy yesterday, she had not thought Darcy’s coming in person would be one of them. There was no doubt in her mind that he visited on Georgiana’s behalf. Evidently the younger woman had not grown out of her habit of wielding her brother like a sword, or a cudgel. He apparently was still content to be so wielded.

“Elizabeth?” Jane spoke slowly. “He does not look pleased. You must have sent the letter after all.”

She had not told Jane yet, of course. Nothing interfered with morning practice after breakfast, and besides, she had wanted time to compose her thoughts and emotions in the cold, reasonable light of day.

“I determined it to be the best course of action. Like any wound, if you continue to pick at it, it will never heal. Better to avoid him and allow the mild discomfort of seeing each other again to fade into the background.”

“Well, pleased or not, he is here in the parlour and asking for you. It is just barely the proper hour for calling, so whatever you said in your letter must have made an impression.”

Elizabeth grimaced. “I am coming.”

Jane nodded and excused herself. Elizabeth looked down but thought better of changing into a more elegant dress. Normally after morning practice she would take the children for a walk and give the

tutor a break. The household could support a live-in governess, but with Elizabeth's presence, it was unnecessary, thus sparing some expense—Robert was a diligent father and set aside money for his daughters' futures. They maintained their comfortable, not quite well-off lifestyle by living frugally.

Therefore, the blue dress she wore and her plain hairstyle would have to do for a morning call. There was no need to preen for Darcy in any case.

Descending the two levels to the parlour, Elizabeth entered the room and shut the door behind her. Darcy turned at once, severe in his customary dark attire.

The air in the usually placid, domestic room lived with tension. A sizzle of withheld emotions, Darcy's rigidity was that of a man restraining an unbecoming display of temper. Icy temper, in his case, as she had never known him to be any other than perfectly courteous even when furious. No, his fury froze rather than scalded. But meeting his gaze now, she wondered if that were still true.

She curtsied. "Mr Darcy. I doubt this is a social call."

He moved away from the window and around the couch until he stood in front of her. She tilted her head back to meet his eyes, though she was of a fair height. This was intolerable.

Walking around him, she took a seat on the couch. "Shall I ring for tea?"

"I do not want tea, Elizabeth."

She glanced up. He had not moved except to turn to face her. His eyes were narrowed on her face and no longer cold.

So, he was dispensing with pleasantries. "Please elucidate what exactly it is that you do want?"

The question hung in the air between them, and for a moment she thought he might say. . .no. Evidently she was as susceptible to fancy as a silly debutante.

"You refused Georgiana's request."

"Ah. Regretfully." She would take an ax to her piano before she admitted her desire to avoid him, to avoid the stare that even now he leveled upon her, wreaking havoc upon her already poor nerves. "I was so pleased to be asked that I forgot I already had a previous engagement."

"You prevaricate." He smiled, a bare quirk of the lips. "I have spent yesterday gathering quite a bit of information on Elise Benichou."

Rising, she felt the warmth of ire flush her cheeks. "I am so sorry—have I done something to deserve such attention? Our association was ten years ago, and surely you would not be suffering from the pique of my refusal even now."

The heat vanished from his face, replaced by amusement, then his customary neutral expression. "You are correct, of course. Only seeing you again is an answer to a question I have been asking myself for months. Years, really."

He wanted her to ask. He could not expect her to ask.

After a protracted moment, Darcy chuckled. "I will play this game with you for now, Elizabeth. I am patient. For now, it is enough that you send me back to my sister with your reacceptance of her invitation. As a guest, and not as an artisan."

"Unfortunately, we are not all maestro's of great fortunes, Mr Darcy. I cannot take the time to indulge myself at the expense of my other engagements, though I thank you for the invitation."

"Either you come, Elizabeth, or there will be no other engagements."

She battled back her temper, anger banishing her calm. "Are you threatening to impugn my reputation? What kind of gentleman—"

He held up a hand. "Of course not, forgive my momentary display of poor temper. Only you leave me with no leverage." He stepped forward, closing the space between them with just enough distance to be considered—barely—respectable. "I wish to see you again."

"But. . .why?" She maintained her composure, expression settled, and prayed he did not see through the lie to how her heart leaped in her chest, straining towards him. She snatched it back and stuffed it back where it belonged. Hearts never knew what was good for them.

Darcy's gaze did not leave her face. "I have had years to think about the words we hurled at each other that day. Years to study. Myself, human nature, love, pride. I am not the same man I was, though perhaps I was only still a boy then."

Her eyebrow began to creep up. One of the subjects he had studied had to have been poetry. He had never been so descriptive in his speech. "I am much the same woman now as I was then."

"Do not be haughty, Elizabeth. It suits you, but not the spirit in which I am endeavouring to offer a rare apology."

Steel, again, beneath the even patience of his words. The steel of a man who refused to be baited away from achieving his goal.

"What do you want?" she asked again.

He reached out in a condemnation of propriety and his fingertips caressed her cheek. Lightly, but with as much command as when she sat at her piano to play. A maestro, certain enough of his power over the instrument beneath him that he knew to treat it gently.

"A second chance."

The words left his mouth before he knew he was going to utter them. Thoughts of a second chance with her had reverberated in his head all the sleepless night and throughout the previous day.

At the gathering he had turned tail and run, her unexpected presence a slap in the face. That he did not want their first conversation in ten years to take place in front of overly observant acquaintances had been an obfuscation.

A man must face his own cowardice and overcome it, or else he did not deserve the woman he esteemed. Georgiana had flayed him with her normally sweet tongue, and it was a well-deserved flaying, at that.

Her pupils widened, a softly inhaled breath trembling on lips opened in surprise. "I—I cannot. Forgive me, I mean no slight to your sister—"

He made an impatient gesture and saw the moment Elizabeth realised how discomposed she sounded and snapped to, withdrawing her emotions behind the half-amused, half-challenging mien she presented to the world. It was her mask, as neutrality and rigid courtesy was his.

"I mean no slight to your sister," she continued in a more even tone. "But I have made up my mind. It is better that we. . .not force ourselves to endure each other's company."

"I do not think you mean to slight Georgiana," he said. "I think you mean to avoid me. I accepted defeat far too easily last time, but I am no longer a young man. I have learned the value in—"

"Refusing to accept a *no* for an answer?"

Years ago, her acerbic tones would have set off a wave of indignation. He stiffened. "I simply wish to renew our acquaintance."

She rose, the slow, elegant movement of an uncoiling snake, and watched him without blinking, her head, neck, and shoulders held perfectly straight.

A lesser man might quail under Elizabeth Bennet's gimlet stare. He was not a lesser man. Or so he told himself.

"I do not know what to think. I ask myself, is Mr Darcy bored with life? Does he have some vengeance in mind for my refusal years ago? But that cannot be true, for that would be foolish, and he is not a foolish man—nor I a woman given to over perceiving esteem in the eyes of others."

"You are overthinking as usual. If you had not tangled your thoughts into an unmanageable knot last time, you would now be wed to me, mother of my children, and not living in penury."

Damn. He had not meant to lose his temper. Her eyes narrowed. Darcy suppressed a wince, keeping his expression smooth. He managed to avoid stony—she was not his opponent after all. Merely a



stubborn woman he refused to allow slip through his grasp a second time.

"I believe you have another engagement to attend, Mr Darcy," Elizabeth said. "Thank you for your call."

The icy dismissal did not disturb him—he was made of sterner nerves—but it represented a setback. He must regain ground quickly. "I apologise for my intemperate words. What I meant to say—"

"I do not care what you meant to say. If you think you have changed, I see no evidence of it."

"You are angry." There could be nothing to gain by engaging her in conversation while in this mood. He had not taken care with his words, once again thrown off balance by the strength of his feelings. His . . . want. Darcy bowed. "I will see you at Georgiana's soiree."

"I have already said I will not come."

Darcy smiled at her. Her sharp words were a gauntlet.

He picked it up. "I accept your challenge, Miss Bennet."



"How did it go?" Georgiana asked him as soon as he returned to their townhouse.

"I believe she was angry when I left. She refused to rescind her refusal."

His sister sighed, eyes closing briefly. "Oh, William. Sometimes I wonder about you. What did you say to her?"

He ran his tongue around his teeth. "You know how prickly she is."

"And yet you love her."

"She is delightful when the prickles are aimed elsewhere."

Georgiana snorted. "So, what will you do now? Shall I go see her myself? It is easy to refuse *you*, but if she is forced to tell *me* no to my face. . ."

Darcy considered the situation. He required leverage of a sort. He had no true desire to coerce her into his company—that certainly was not conducive to developing affection. But if she would just give them a chance, surely, she would come to see his side of things.

Was he wrong? Should he accept her refusal and walk away? He could not help think that if they would both stop tripping over their tongues and tempers, they would find in each other a depth of compatibility, passion. . . .

"No, I must find other means," he said. "Perhaps I might enlist Adenauer's aid. It seems as if he is wed now to her elder sister, and Elizabeth lives with her and her husband. That cannot be a completely satisfactory arrangement. They do not reside in the most fashionable

part of town.”

“No? I cannot imagine Elizabeth plys her trade for amusement only.”

“No, neither can I. The family must need the income.”

“Oh, this is so vexing! Any other woman in such a situation would be batting her lashes in order to gain your attention. But then that is why you loved her.”

“Hmm.” It was part of the reason why. He was a man, not a bull. “If I inform her sister and brother-in-law she has refused your invitation, they may insist she accept. The eldest always struck me as a woman of good sense.”

## Chapter 5

Robert held out the letter, dark eyes sly. "Read it for yourself, Lizzy. He implores I lend him my support in persuading you to attend the soiree. I do so love a handsome man who begs prettily."

Elizabeth snatched the letter, making a face at her brother-in-law. What was supposed to be a pleasant family tea was becoming a skirmish on a battlefield constructed by Mr Darcy. Why was he so insistent? She refused to believe any of his dribble about. . .feelings and second chances and. . .bah!

"I have already informed His Highness—" she scanned the contents, temper rising with every sentence.

*. . .would be desolate if Miss Bennet did not attend. She has pleaded other engagements, but perhaps you might convince her of the worthiness of my sister's small request. . . .*

She handed the letter to her small nephew, who promptly crumpled it into a ball and threw it across the room. Elizabeth watched the arc of the flying paper with satisfaction as it crashed against a wall and tumbled to the floor.

Robert coughed and glanced at his wife, who busied herself with the older girls, avoiding Elizabeth's glare. "What do you think, my dear?"

"She should attend, of course."

"Jane! You traitor."

"You must heal the breach, Lizzy." Jane buttered a slice of bread for her daughter. "If it weighs so heavily on his conscience, it would be uncharitable not to allow him to make amends."

"Make amends? Mr Darcy?" She stared at her sister. "Since when did he ever care about amends?"

"People change," Robert said. The amusement faded from his expression. "He is older now, and from all you have said over the years—which is little enough—your parting was abrupt and acrimonious. That sort of thing is heavy on a man's shoulders, especially if he truly cared for the lady."

She refrained from a reply for the sake of happy familial relations, but after tea, Elizabeth took the letter and left the house.

For once and for all, she was going to put a stop to this. The Darcys might be the lords of their own demesne, but no one ruled Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy received her in the library. The butler informed Elizabeth, as she strode past him, that Miss Darcy was not in residence at the time. The words flowed over her head. It was not Miss Darcy she desired to have words with—though she suspected Georgiana had indeed spurred her brother to write that letter to Robert. Such a clever tactic, for how could Elizabeth refuse an invitation of that merit when the family knew such invitations were what led to future business?

“Miss Bennet,” Darcy said when she entered, rising from his chair, perfectly correct until the butler closed the door quietly behind her. Then he smiled. “I was wondering how long it would take you to hunt me down.”

She held up the letter. “You went behind my back and solicited the aid of my brother-in-law.”

“Yes. Did I tell you I was surprised to learn he is actually the Robert Adenauer of whom Elise Benichou speaks so highly?”

Elizabeth paused, wary. Was there a thread of irony in Darcy’s tone? Of warning? Had he not intimated having investigated her? She had brushed that aside during his call the other day, proof of how he disturbed her common sense. A discreet question here, a casual inquiry there, and he would know all there was to know about her public persona for the last several years.

“I do not advertise the connection. Some might seek to take advantage.”

“Oh, indeed.” Now the mockery was open, if softened by the warmth lurking in his eyes. “And you certainly do not take advantage of it to recommend his services.”

Somehow, he had managed to turn her angry tirade around and reflect it back at herself. Only he was not angry. Darcy approached with deliberate steps, the small smile hovering around his lips. No, not angry at all but rather. . .pleased.

“I did not come to discuss how I conduct my trade,” she said. He winced, a slight hitch in his step he attempted to smooth over. Elizabeth smirked. “Rather, I came to discuss the nefarious—”

“Nefarious? Now really.”

“—lengths to which you will go to put me in your sister’s employ.”

He had better control of himself this time. He stopped in front of her, looking down with his half-haughty expression. “I have no interest in employing you. It is an invitation to attend, and if you grace us with your exquisite skills while present, it would be a boon. You know very well how my sister adores music.”

“And as I told Miss Darcy, I thank her for the invitation, but I cannot cancel my other engagements. A household requires—”

Darcy held up a hand. "I am well aware of the requirements of a household. Trust me, you will not lose in that regard. Only think of how I might help you in society if you agree to this one inconsequential request."

Her eyes widened. "I cannot tell if that is a bribe or a threat. I had thought you decided the use of threats would not avail you."

He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "It is not a threat. Call it a carrot."

"Ah ha! A carrot precedes a stick!"

"You are the most stubborn woman," he growled. "Just attend the damn—"

She took a step forward, temper igniting to match his, and jabbed his chest with her finger. "I pray you mend your choice of words, sir. I will not have such speech befall my tender ears."

Darcy grabbed her finger, and then the hand attached to it. She pulled away but he held fast, glaring. "Your ears ceased such tenderness before you were out of leading strings, if I could wager on a guess."

She sniffed. "Any other woman would think you were implying she was not a lady."

"I do not care about any other woman. I only want the one in front of me."

Her breath caught. In the silence, Darcy continued to stare at her, his eyes clear with challenge, not taking the words back. The inciting, scandalous words.

"Enlisting my brother-in-law to force my hand will not endear you to me." She managed, with the grace of God, to keep her voice even. Though her heart skipped several beats, her imagination was running wild with all manner of thoughts she must snatch back and stuff away.

"I had to devise desperate tactics." His head lowered, tone husky. "You take far too much delight in resisting my charms."

"Your—are you mad? Your *what*?"

"Do not protest, Elizabeth. If you did not agree, you would not still be here arguing with me, your eyes brighter than the stars and the blush of red roses on your cheeks."

This time when she yanked away, perfectly indignant and ignoring her shaken emotions, he released her.

"I will not play these games with you. I am not to be toyed with." She turned and began to stride away but a strong hand grasped her upper arm, whirling her around.

"Toyed with?" His anger was true this time, the glitter in blue eyes real outrage rather than his irascible enjoyment of needling her. "I did not toy with you then and neither do I do so now. It was always your own insecurity that ascribed dishonourable intentions to me."

"I—"

“No. I allow you your say far too often. In fact, I curse your father for how shamelessly he indulged you. You speak when you should listen, Elizabeth Bennet. It is time you listen to me.”

She spluttered. “Why, you—you—bully.” The sound of grinding teeth soothed her soul.

“Now we are degenerating to insults. Are we truly unable to conduct a rational communication?”

“For communication there must first be trust and understanding. I do not understand why you are doing this and—”

“As usual, you do not trust my intentions. I never understood. Why, Elizabeth? Do I have a reputation for harming women?”

“No, of course not. Do not be ridiculous.”

Now he seized both her upper arms, fingers tightening. “Then what is it? I have apologised for my arrogance.”

“You absolutely have not. Believe me, sir, I would not have forgotten one of your *rare* apologies.”

Blue eyes narrowed, paling with aggravation. “Did you open any of my letters?”

Her forehead creased. “You sent more than one? Robert only received—”

“No.” He ground out each word. “Ten years ago—my letters ten years ago.”

He was unraveling, poor man. Sympathy soothed some of her anger. Perhaps he felt as old and lonely, as rudderless, as she—except during those times she played her piano. She was fortunate to have such a gift, an outlet to explore passion and art and emotion. What did he have other than his wealth, and if one did not spend it to improve the lives of others, it must be a hollow comfort, indeed. Perhaps she reminded him of happier times in his youth. Well. . .times in his youth, in any case.

“You must calm yourself, Mr Darcy. I did not receive any letters ten years ago.”

“Calm myself. . .” His eyes closed. “I could shake you.”

Darcy released her, turning away and walking several paces towards a corner of the room. She rubbed her upper arms. The damn man had probably left bruises.

When he faced her again, he had smoothed the emotion from voice and expression. “I wrote you several letters, Elizabeth. We were nearly betrothed, after all.”

“Nearly does not count.” It occurred to her that they were very much alone in this room.

It was almost as if he read her thoughts. Darcy clasped his hands behind his back and moved forward again. “You are correct—it counts for nothing. And yet we are alone here. Highly improper, would you

not agree?"

The purr in his voice brushed along her spine. She wet her bottom lip, then caught the nervous gesture and pressed her mouth tight.

"In fact," he continued "even compromising."

It was now Elizabeth's turn to lift her eyes to the ceiling. "I am as far back on the shelf as the shelf will allow. I fear no compromise. No one knows Elizabeth Bennet, in any case."

She sighed, the last of her anger fading. Young girls were foolish. As an adult, she understood that true compatibility was when the couple complemented each other's weaknesses—not exacerbated them.

"Darcy, we are tinder together. When your temper flickers into life, so does mine, and soon there is a conflagration. We argue, hurl words like flaming stones."

While she spoke, he had returned to his former place in front of her. "Because the only avenue available to us now is argument. Even now, do you still not understand what it all means?"

She swayed forward a step, then stilled.

"Indifference," he said, gaze intense, "is the opposite of love. Not hate. So, give me your hate, if that is all you can—give me something."

The first brush of his lips on hers was no surprise; he had not bothered to hide his intent. Indeed, he had exaggerated each motion as he lowered his head, drew her into the circle of his arms. Gave her every opportunity to resist, to slap his face, to remember all the reasons she was indifferent towards him. . .all the days after the flames of their last fight cooled to a heap of ashes, cold days where she searched her mind for a solution. An excuse.

But she had been unable to excuse his callous words to her family. Then, or now.

Elizabeth held up a hand, placing it between their mouths, cutting off breath that had just begun to mingle. "What has changed, Darcy? I am now old enough to dally with, and with no embarrassing younger sisters as an encumbrance?"

His expression turned fierce, brows drawing together in a scowl. "Invite all of your sisters to Georgiana's soiree. I do not care; they may run as mad as they desire. I am responsible for no person's conduct besides my own."

Her eyes opened wide. "But what will society think?"

"I do not care." He seized her around the waist, holding her fast with a hand pressed against her neck and this time she allowed the kiss to deepen. For a moment, she abandoned doubt and reveled in the blaze of feeling traveling throughout her limbs, the tightening of her bosom as he pulled her flush against his body.

"I hoped a kiss would put out the fire," he whispered. "My hope was in vain."

Oh, why must he speak? His voice tormented her with memory. His touch awakened cravings she had grimly buried, cravings that appeared whenever she looked a little longer than polite as Robert escorted Jane to their bedroom, longings whenever she held a new niece or nephew in her arms.

Tears pricked her eyes. Horrified, Elizabeth jerked away, whirling to protect her dignity, a grown woman, reduced to tears by a simple kiss.

"Elizabeth," he said, touching her shoulder. "I will not ask forgiveness. Not for the kiss."

"Do not be a fool." She spoke sharply, summoning the familiar comfort of anger.

"I am not a fool," was the even reply. "But I am a man who is tired of being alone, and who knows when the companion of his life is in front of his face."

She shook her head fiercely. "This is all too sudden. I cannot just in an hour change all my thoughts, memories, of you."

"I understand."

Elizabeth walked to the door.

He did not stop her this time, but he did call out, "The soiree, Miss Bennet. I expect to see you there."

She paused, hand on the knob. "My mind has not changed in that regard. I am not coming."

"You will come." Smooth, silky, steel. "If you do not, you will never play in society again. That is a threat."

Her fingers tightened, turning white from the pressure. She clung to the knob to avoid turning around and pouring forth every intemperate word in her mind that she would surely regret saying later. Oh, how angry he made her feel, and she was the most even tempered of women. "You stoop to threatening a poor spinster now?"

Darcy laughed. "You may be poor, though I know those among my servants who would disagree. But you are no helpless spinster, Elizabeth Bennet."



## Chapter 6

“Miss Benichou, I did not realize you were a particular friend of Miss Darcy,” Lady. . .

Elizabeth’s mind drew a blank as to the Lady’s name. She could not be expected to know everyone, after all. Indeed, she could barely recall her own name, her thoughts were so full of Darcy. So full of a man who subtly stalked her throughout the room. Besides his first initial greeting when she had entered the evening soiree, he had confined his interaction with her to stares across the crush.

A restrained greeting, except for his eyes, which revealed a masculine appreciation for her gown. Jane, surprisingly, had talked her into the neckline and deep wine color with her husband walking critical circles around Elizabeth and offering his French-Germanic perspective on hemlines, trims, and drape. Elizabeth was not a young woman, though she was not old, and a daring cut and color would be less remarked upon were she a girl fresh out of the schoolroom.

The dress would remind Darcy she was no longer the carefree countryside miss she had once been, but a mature woman who did not need to wed in order to support herself or conform to society’s notions of propriety.

Georgiana, in a watercolor blue, attached herself to Elizabeth as if they were long lost sisters. When Elizabeth had finally broached the subject of providing the entertainment which was supposed to be her reason for coming here, it had been brushed away as if she was simply another guest.

“Oh, well, not quite a—” Elizabeth began.

“We knew each other as girls,” Georgiana said, beaming. “We lost touch, but I was quite pleased to have stumbled upon my dear friend here in London. You know how girlhood friendships can be. Life intervenes and, la.”

“Oh, quite,” the lady said. “Correspondence is so important in maintaining one’s connections.”

Georgiana’s head swiveled towards the opening strains of music announcing the first set of the evening. “But come, we must have dancing. Miss Benichou must forgive me, but I thought she might like to rest her fingers tonight. She was so kind to oblige me, but I imposed on her shamefully.”

Elizabeth stopped herself from giving an eye roll. She had already

determined that Georgiana had no intention of allowing her to play tonight, marking her firmly as a guest.

The lady nodded. "Yes, yes, a lovely idea. . ."

Though Elizabeth was accustomed to mingling with guests after she played, she never danced. It was the one restriction she enforced upon herself, despite her longing. She could never forget that when she was present as Miss Benichou, she was not free to be Miss Bennet. It was one thing for a gentleman to flirt with the intriguing Benichou, quite another for him to kiss the hand of the respectable Bennet. It had never mattered much before, in any case, as the joy of dancing dimmed somewhat over the years.

Darcy, a small voice said, saw neither Bennet nor Benichou. He saw Elizabeth. Both halves of her person were, with him, one. She found herself searching the crowd and yanked her gaze back to directly in front of her where couples were forming two lines.

Where was he? Not that she desired he come and speak to her, of course, but she had expected something after all of his verbal histrionics about second chances and threats and—

"Miss. . . Benichou," a deep voice said behind her.

A voice that, as always, caressed her skin like warm silk, drawing the lightest of shivers.

Elizabeth turned. "Mr Darcy." How could he convey all the intensity of their last conversation and still maintain polite social mask? If she had thought herself an actress, her talent was no comparison to his.

He held out a hand. "May I claim this dance?"

How could she refuse? She accepted his hand with a certain resignation. She did not toy with herself that she had any desire to do so.

The dance echoed one from so many years ago. Another dance, another assembly, another time. But the same man, albeit younger, and less fluid then. A new grace brought on by the comfort in oneself that came with maturity? Whatever it was, Darcy was both the same and different.

"I am almost disappointed," he said when the dance was over, speaking quietly into her ear.

They drifted towards a quiet corner, Elizabeth distracted enough in his presence she was not paying the least attention to where they were going. He maneuvered her subtly.

"What disappoints you?" she asked.

His mouth quirked in the small, half smile she was beginning to associate with the older Darcy. The man who was not quite so bent on appearing so very socially correct.

"That you came. I was rather looking forward to hunting you

down.” His tone was light, his meaning was not.

She waited until she could speak indifferently. He had begun to wage war during the dance, each seemingly innocent touch, in reality, a brief caress. “I am not a fox to give you sport.”

“Not a fox, no. A woman, and a wily one.” His eyes traveled over her body in a lazy perusal, and she imagined it was his hands, or his mouth.

Elizabeth inhaled, chest tightening, and cursed the low neckline of her gown, the thin fabric. “I have no wiles, sir.”

“Of course not, Miss Benichou.” The open mockery again, his deliberate hesitation over her name.

“Stop it,” she said, nearly a hiss. “I have very good reasons for concealing my true name.”

“Undoubtedly, and I understand why.” He waved a hand when she began to protest. “It is of no matter. There are other things for us to discuss. Have you made up your mind?”

By the heavens, he could flit from topic to topic with such dizzying speed, leaving her little mental space to stay abreast.

“What was it you desired me to make up my mind about?”

“Desire? An intriguing question. . .what I desire.”

He was toying with her, again, and it gave her the clarity of anger. “You speak to me as if I am a courtesan.”

“I speak to you as if you are a woman, and one in whom beats a passionate heart.” The response was quiet, intense, with an absence of lurid mockery.

“I think I see.”

And she did. She had not expected an outright proposition from Darcy, not even after the kiss. She had not expected an offer of marriage, either. . .what *had* she expected? That he would simply wish to reminisce until she was out of his blood? If that was the case, she would never be out of his blood, for he would always be in hers. Indelibly imprinted into each sinew of her body.

But he had made clear he had some end in mind. Understanding came so swiftly, she was light headed from it.

He must have heard something in her voice. “What do you see?”

They stared at each other. “You want to exorcise me. To finally erase me from your memories.”

Darcy watched her intently. Elizabeth’s eyes closed as she steeled her spine. As the very same spine melted.

There was only one way to exorcise him. One way. And it was unlikely she would ever wed. If she lived to an old age, she would live to regret if she had never known what it was to taste his lips, feel the strength of his arms.

Could she not fall just this one time?

When she opened her eyes, his hand was waiting for her.



She was beautiful.

The room was full of fashionable ladies, many of them highly accomplished. Beauties hailed by society. Elizabeth drew his eye every time. If he stared at her long enough, she might look his way and—there. The faintest flicker in her inscrutable facade. A crack in armor that echoed his own. No one else would understand it for what it was, but he knew.

She drifted into the crowd as he made his way across the room, but his sister was keeping track of his movements. Georgiana glanced at him once, then conveniently drew away the ladies currently engaged in conversation. Leaving the field open.

He meant only to claim a dance, but now as she stared up at him, he thought she might be offering him much more.

“Erasure was not quite what I had in mind,” Darcy said. “In fact, the word is far too permanent. Quench, sate. . .those are better choices.”

“When I entered society as Elise Benichou, I made a gamble.” She spoke as if to herself.

Darcy lifted a brow. “And you are prepared for another one?”

She finally placed her hand in his. “I think I must.”

Four words, uttered so softly but with such vehemence. Darcy hesitated. He was not a child nor an innocent. He knew what she was gifting him, in her discreet way. Her play with words, necessitated by the fact that they were standing far too close, and in the middle of some of the loosest tongues in society. Elizabeth might not realise they were being watched, but he knew better.

“Come,” he said. “A turn in the library.”

They skirted the edges of the room, Darcy slipping out before Elizabeth, who had stayed behind to converse with an acquaintance. The delay served to disconnect their movements in the minds of any who might be paying attention. Rather than grimacing with distaste at the thought of being the subject of lurid speculation, Darcy realized the tension in his thighs and abdomen, the beat of blood in his temple mimicked the rising fervor of a hunter prepared to start the long chase of his wily prey.

Eventually she joined him where he lurked in the hallway and they made their way towards the library. In silence.

As they cleared the part of his home where one might expect to run into a guest, his hand settled onto the small of her back and he diverted their path. Past the library, up stairs, toward the suite where

no woman had ever stepped foot, not even his sister.

The suite where he had sat, shoulders slumped, many a night. There were emotions a man could not show his family, despair he could not reveal without causing the gentler hearts of female relatives distress. Times he had questioned the purpose of his existence—Georgiana could run Pemberley as well as he, and their household staff guarded their duty ferociously.

“Darcy,” she said in her low, husky voice as he placed a hand on his door.

He paused, turning to her. She met his eyes briefly, then looked away. Darcy lifted a hand, gently cupping her cheek. “If you decide to join me in my room, we can do no more than sit and talk, or sit and play cards, or whatever you desire.”

Her lips quirked. “It is not a game of cards you want from me.”

“Nor you from me. But we will both wait, if necessary.”

She inhaled, then let the breath out and lifted her head. “One night, no expectations.”

He said nothing, inclining his head. Let her think he had no expectations of her, if that would make her feel better. He pushed aside a flicker of guilt at not telling her beforehand that he wanted everything. Mind, heart, body, hand in marriage.

After a moment Darcy opened the door. As she stepped forward, impulse seized him. He halted her, sliding an arm around her back and lifted Elizabeth into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed, arms wrapping around his neck. “You had best not drop me.”

He smiled. “Dear Elizabeth, I will never disappoint you again.”

## Chapter 7

Darcy set her on her feet and pulled her back against himself, the heat of his erection nestling between the curve of her buttocks. He felt her inhalation, the fine trembles running through her body igniting his instincts. He had never known himself to be an uncivilized man, but he felt it now. The crave to claim.

“Do I dare take down your hair?” he asked, lips caressing her ear.

“I do not think it wise.” A steady response, despite her restless movements in his arms.

Far too steady for his liking. His mouth turned down. She was not unaffected, her body betrayed her cool tones. But he did not want her quite so calm.

“Very well.” He sank his fingers into the coiffed hair at her neck, tilting her head to the side to give him access to her graceful, golden neck. The hue of a woman who loved nature.

In his mind, the vision of a girl just over the cusp of adulthood captured him. Laughing dark eyes, flushed cheeks, hair gleaming in the sun as she strode across an open field. Uncaring of mud, uncaring of fickle weather. And uncaring of the kiss of sunlight deepening her skin.

The girl was now a cautious woman, not quite so unfettered, at least in public. Here, now, behind closed doors, he meant to set that girl free.

Had he ever felt so alive as he did now, anticipation spicing his blood? In the prime of his life, had he ever existed in the present with such ferocity as he now felt?

Mouth trailing a caress down sweet skin, his other hand slipped over her collarbone and delved within the opening of her gown.

Her chest expanded as he cupped a breast, the movement rough. He palmed her flesh, squeezing. Elizabeth gasped, hands coming up to grab his wrists.

Darcy stilled. “Do you deny me?”

“No, but. . .” Now the tremble in her voice. “No. I just did not expect—”

“Does my touch please you?” Deft fingertips found her nipple, rolling the nub into a stiff peak. His errant hips undulated against her, reminding them both of the purpose of this sport.

“I. . .yes.”

“Good. Then abide a moment longer, if you please.”

“I please,” was the drier, steadier reply.

He would destroy her calm. It was his only goal tonight. To make her cry out his name, shatter her self control.

Darcy released her neck, plucking at the fabric of her sleeve. “This is rather superfluous, do you agree?”

“Do your worst.”

His eyes narrowed. “Such a tart tongue. Do you know how I might punish you with mine?”

“Of course, I do not know. I am a respectable woman.” She stiffened in his arms, matching her prim tone. “Though no longer, I suppose.”

“Ah, a fallen woman.”

“Do not mock me.”

“You are unmocked. If you fall, so to do I.”

He released her breast, turning her in his arms, and paused. Her cheeks reddened, her gaze avoiding his again. Darcy realized, with a start, that she was still shy.

“Do you have a dressing room?” she asked.

Of course, he did. Darcy nodded towards the side door, stepping away to give her room. She glanced once at him, hesitated, then fled. This first time he would allow the shyness. He was not a cad. But after tonight. . .

Elizabeth stepped back into the room, a dark robe belted loosely over her form. The material skimmed breasts and hugged the curve of her thighs, a deep v revealing a generous expanse of cleavage. Her hair was still bound.

Darcy frowned, fingers flexing. He must not allow her bound hair to become a symbol of how she yet withheld herself. It was sensible—she would have to leave at some point and mussed hair would damn her reputation before he was able to convince her to stay with him. Forever.

“You are frowning,” she said, approaching with soft steps. “The robe displeases you? Then either you do not like it, or you do not like to share.”

She stopped in front of him. Darcy reached out and grasped her waist, pulling her closer. “I do not like to share what is mine, that is true.” And soon she would be his in the eyes of God and man. How could she turn from him after tonight? He knew her better than she knew herself—she would not be here if she did not care for him. If the thought of being his wife was not already in the forefront of her mind.

In his mind, she was already his wife.

Her neck tilted back, pupils widening as he lowered his head, mouth hovering over succulent lips.

Lips he claimed, taking breath and stoking desire. He had not kissed many women, and this one mattered more than any of them. Her pleasure was paramount; in pleasing her he would find his ultimate release.

Darcy slid the robe over her shoulders, listening to the silken fall of cloth onto the floor. Her hands pressed against his chest. His palms found her nether cheeks, cupping smooth flesh, kneading to bring heat to her skin.

She sighed, a soft moan of contentment, her eyelids drifting closed. It was not contentment he wanted her to feel. Moving a hand between their bodies, his fingers delved into the nest of thick curls.

Her eyelids flew open. "Darcy."

This would not do. "Hush."

Lifting her into his arms, he turned and carried her to the bed, laying her gently onto the counterpane and following after. For just a moment, he looked his fill, allowing the image of her pale gold skin, the weight of her breasts crowned with dusky nipples, the generous flare of hips to imprint indelibly in his mind. And there, hiding between her legs, already plump nether lips crowned with a crop of glorious curls.

His cock pulsed, a painful pressure he fought with himself to ignore. All he had to do was spread her thighs, imprison her delicate ankles in his hands and make her a wanton prisoner to their desire. Plunge inside and release them both. Her lush mouth, glittering eyes and the hard buds of her nipples proved she falling as fast as he.

Balancing the weight of his body on his forearms, he kissed her again, almost distracted by her slender fingers weaving into his hair. Lithe legs restless beneath him.

But he recalled he wanted to destroy her control, her calm. Wanted to prove the benefits of being in his bed permanently.

Sliding down her body, he took her hands and urged her silently into a sitting position, indicating with silent gestures that she should balance her buttocks on the edge of the bed.

"What are we doing?" The bloom of red in her cheeks was now a conflagration. "I thought. . ."

"Hush, you sweet child."

Her mouth snapped closed, dark eyes sparking in irritation. Darcy placed his hands around her waist, smiling wickedly to show his pleasure at her irritation, and crouched at her feet.

"I read about this in a book," he said, voice all innocence. "It is to bring you pleasure."

"Read about what?"

She squeaked when he spread her legs, gripping the plump flesh of her thighs and yanking her forward one more inch, right into his



waiting mouth.

He took her in this way, peeling back the first layer of her innocence.

Elizabeth Bennet, in his bed, writhing under his mouth.

Heaven.

## Chapter 8

He tormented her. Every stroke of his tongue on her body of this decadent torture drew her deeper under his spell.

Languor suffused Elizabeth's limbs as the heat centered in that nubbin of mysterious flesh burst. Her inner walls clenched, her fingers digging into the counterpane to steady trembling arms.

Oddly enough, her shyness at appearing nude in front of him had lasted mere moments. The shape of her body was pleasing enough, she decided. She did not know what men preferred in a feminine form, but when Darcy had stared at her, the intensity of his gaze showed his approval.

Darcy looked up, his blue eyes scorching gems, reflecting starlight. Faceted like the personality of the man kneeling at her feet, worshipping her with his tongue.

"Tell me how you feel," he said. No—demanded.

She licked her bottom lip, wanting to formulate a coherent sentence before speaking. He was having none of it. Darcy rose, placing one knee on the edge of the bed as he leaned over her.

"No, Elizabeth. Your composure infuriates me."

"That makes no sense."

But. . .it did. Had she not tossed in her bed the previous night, dreaming of Darcy's hands, Darcy's mouth, his eyes dark with passion, the rasp in his voice just for her?

Her gaze left his face, trailing along his fully clothed body. Stopping for a moment on the clear evidence of his arousal.

Elizabeth realised, fully realised, that she was completely naked on his bed and he had yet to rid himself of the armour of clothing.

He nudged her and she moved backwards, lying down, a wealth of fine cloth brushing against her skin.

But. . .was he wearing boots? "Darcy. . ."

He ignored her, mouth and hands already toying with her breasts. He drew one globe into his mouth as a clever hand slipped back into the curls of her mound. And strayed further down, opening her lips and stroking secret flesh.

"Did you know that a woman's body makes a special honey to ease her claiming?"

His lips were at her ear now, and she barely heard the words because his knees edged hers apart, his finger entering her just enough

for her to understand the tightness of her opening.

Elizabeth gave him a look. Did he think her silly? "Not actual honey."

He laughed, a richly amused sound. "Well, if you attempted to extract it and put a dollop in your tea, you might run into objections."

"You are mocking me again." Not that she much cared. Her thighs tensed, and she gasped.

"Not at all." His free hand caressed her cheek. "You speak so forthrightly, I forget you are still a maid."

There was a hint of a question in his tone. She refused to answer. He would find out himself soon enough, she supposed. Elizabeth was not ignorant—she knew how mammals mated. He would place his rod inside her body and. . .

"The look on your face. . . what are you thinking, Elizabeth?"

"Wicked thoughts."

"I see."

Her eyes closed, back arching as his finger slid deeper. Her legs loosened, splaying open to invite him in.

"I want to touch you as well," she said, then opened her eyes. "Perhaps you might. . ."

He withdrew, and she cursed herself because it meant his touch was no longer on her body. But patience was rewarded in this case. He removed his clothing, his gaze on her the entire time, nothing hesitant in his manner.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. Darcy paused, brow lifting. "How many women have you. . . never mind. It is not my business."

"I have never brought a woman into my bed. You are the first."

Unspoken, you are the last.

But she imagined such words. Elizabeth put them firmly from her mind and focused on the present. On living this one dream of hers, even if she might only live it once.

If her form pleased him, his definitively pleased her. He possessed the musculature of a man who spent his days in activity and did not overindulge. Her gaze drifted over broad shoulders and lean waist, following a line of dark hair into a copse from which sprang his male member.

She cleared her throat, refusing to ask a foolish question such as, was he quite certain it would fit? Of course it would, or women would not be able to birth babies. His finger inside her had felt so tight, but surely her body would open to accommodate. Surely.

"Look your fill," he crooned, lowering his head to peer at her with boyish false modesty.

Elizabeth nearly snorted. He was quite proud of himself, was he not? He moved within arms length and reaching out, she ran a finger

along the length of his pride and joy, caressing the satiny head.

He exhaled, the member swelling as she wrapped her hand around it, testing his response to her touch. Fascinated by the slightly pained look that crossed his features as she tightened her grip, recalling the natural movements of various stallions over the years, her hand traveled to the base of his length, then back up again.

Darcy placed his hand over hers, showing her the speed and pressure that drew droplets of moisture from the tiny slit on the head. This time it was his eyelids that fluttered half closed.

"My powerful skills of observation lead me to believe you like this," she said, half dry, half amused.

"My dear, you have no idea." He removed her hand. "But enough. My plan is not to spend myself betwixt your fingers. At least, not this time."

His gaze traveled along her body again, settling between her thighs. "Open for me, Elizabeth."

Obediently, she respread her legs slowly. Sparing a moment's thought for the party going on downstairs, a thrill of delight ran over her spine. The thrill of the forbidden, of taking for herself what society and propriety said she must not. But damn them all. Why should an unwed woman, independent and past her debutante years, suffer to remain a maiden her entire life? Surely God was not so cruel as to wish her to never experience what was natural between a man and a woman.

"This is wicked," she whispered.

He smiled. "You do not seem displeased by that. I rather think you enjoy being wicked, Elizabeth."

"I do not yet know what I enjoy."

Darcy's voice deepened. "Let us remedy that."

She banished the thoughts as he settled between her legs, his weight pressing her into the bed though he was careful to rest much of it on his arms. Arms that caged her, made plain her submission as the head of his member pressed against her entrance.

Instinctively she lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist to give him better access. He did not enter, however, instead lowering his head to kiss her once again. Tongue slipping between her lips, seasoned with the faint flavor of red wine. His mouth trailed her jaw, settled on the side of her neck.

Teeth scraped skin, biting gently into her flesh as his hand slid between their bodies again and resumed his play with her bud. Elizabeth gasped in his mouth, hips arching in a timeless plea.

Her lower body clenched, need growing, hips pressing almost desperately against his erection.

"Tell me what you desire," he said. "Your pleas will feed me on my

lonely nights.”

“When have you been lonely?” A trace of bitterness in her voice she did not bother to disguise. “You may pluck any flower you wish.”

His gaze held hers. “Except the one bloom I desired above all others slipped through my fingers. Tell me, Elizabeth.”

What there any better aphrodisiac than a strong man pleading for succor? Darcy might think his pleas were demands, but Elizabeth knew were she to say this very moment that her mind was changed, he would remove himself unfulfilled. He needed more than a brief physical coupling. He needed the submission of her mind, her heart. She recognised it instinctively and marveled that she held such power over him, even if it was only in these few moments.

Elizabeth twined her arms around his neck. “Make love to me, Darcy. Give me a memory to fill my nights.” A memory. . .perhaps something more.

She flinched away from that particular wish, for it could never be.

He was gentle in his claiming, giving her body time to adjust before abandoning himself to the timeless rhythm of man and woman. Her worries, her bitterness, her smugness at flaunting propriety to seize her chance to come into full womanhood on her own terms. . .all that became nothing under the onslaught of pleasure.

In time, she gave him all the words he wished, barely recognising the alternate pleas and demands, his name on her lips as she soared to an exquisite precipice and then tumbled headlong into her climax.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured once they were spent. He settled onto his back, pulling her across his chest, languid caresses up and down her skin adding aftershocks to the waves inside her body. “Thank you.”

Thank you? *Thank you?* As if she had provided him with a service. She waited until she could reply in a placid tone. “You are welcome. I do so hope you enjoyed yourself.”

His wandering hands paused for a split second before resuming their idle path. “Of course I, ah. . .did. . .you enjoy yourself? I know a woman’s first time can bring discomfort.”

No more discomfort than being thanked as if she was a competent shopkeeper. No words of endearment, no protestations of love. Well, what had she expected? No, she had not gone into this expecting anything, not even the offer of a long term liaison, which would have been impossible. Eventually society would take note of such a thing, and she would never be able to ply her skills in respectable society parlours again. No, she had a very good financial reason to stay far away from Darcy. He could very well ruin her.

“There was some discomfort, but it was quite pleasant.”

“Pleasant. Now I am annoyed.”

Elizabeth squeaked. Her flipped her over onto her back without warning, staring down at her with hot, narrowed eyes.

"Pleasant, the woman says. *Clearly*, I did not execute my duty properly."

She blinked. "That is not at all what I meant, sir."

"And now she sirs me." His voice deepened to a croon. "I am no sir, but you may call me master."

She snorted. "I wish you joy in your attempt to persuade me to call you master."

He widened his eyes. "Did you just challenge me, Elizabeth Bennet?"

Her heart rate plummeted, then restarted. Something in his tone. . something not quite gentlemanly. She cleared her throat. "Ah. . .yes?"

"Good." Darcy smiled.



"Stay the night," he asked hours later, voice drugged. "If someone sees you leave at this time, there is no plausible excuse."

"Very well."

A new awareness bloomed inside her, bringing joy and, also, trepidation. Now that she understood the depths of pleasure and connection she felt, how could she ever go back to her previous existence? Lying there in his arms, she knew she must. This was a temporary reprieve, a purging of past regrets for them both.

Lying there, she began to rebuild her will to hold her heart away from him, a little at a time until when he placed a kiss on her lips. She looked him in the eye, smiled, and showed nothing of how her heart lay frozen in her chest.

## Chapter 9

Darcy's eyes opened. She slipped out of the room, quietly shutting the door.

Sitting up, he rubbed a hand over his face with a sigh. He supposed he could not have hoped she would linger, enjoy an intimate breakfast with him. Elizabeth, in her dressing gown, leaning across the small table in his sitting room to peer at the paper as they sipped strong tea and picked at eggs. After breakfast he imagined she would have her own pursuits, her music to practice, her family to attend. Whatever calls were required that day and other concerns. Perhaps that evening they might attend a—

Darcy pulled his thoughts short, understanding the fantasy he was crafting in his mind. A fantasy of home, marriage. Family.

But she had slipped out of his bed and home without even telling him good morning. Disgruntled, Darcy left the bed and began his morning routine, considering his options.

"Brother," Georgiana said when he entered the breakfast room. "My lady's maid reported the oddest tidbit from downstairs."

A footman laid a plate in front of him. He nodded thanks and sat back in his chair, preparing himself for the interrogation. "I hope you are not about to regale me with women's gossip."

She sipped her tea. "Not at all. I do have a question, however—why was Elizabeth Bennet seen leaving this house right after dawn?"

He could lie and he considered it. But it would be an insult to Georgiana's intelligence. "That is not your concern," he said mildly.

She set her cup down. "William. You cannot carry on a liaison with Elizabeth Bennet—she cannot be your mistress. She is a decent gentlewoman of good family, even if her sister did marry somewhat down. You know what you must do."

Buttering a slice of toast he did not want, he said, "I know what I would prefer to do, but the outcome of this is in the hands of the lady."

Her scornful look flayed him. "No, it is not. You must go after her and make your offer. That is how the game is played, and every woman knows it."

He set the toast down with a sigh. "I do not even know if she will say yes."

"As if she has a choice."

“There is always a choice, Sister. Always.”

After breakfast, however, Darcy came to a decision. He had told himself he was on the hunt, that he would not abide Elizabeth to refuse him yet again. He had also told himself he wished her to choose him of her own free will and not feel forced to accept an offer to preserve her reputation. There had to be a middle road. The middle road would start with a heartfelt discussion, and this time he would not let his temper or her obstinacy to derail him.

They would have it out and come to a resolution that included a betrothal.

Leaving his townhouse, Darcy returned to Elizabeth's home, running through scenarios in his mind as to how she would respond to his presence. Perhaps he should have given it a day or two to not appear overly anxious. The woman had just left his bed hours ago, by God. He need not behave as if his life was desolate without her by his side. . .even if it was true.

His insides told him not to wait, however. Giving Elizabeth Bennet time to think never worked in his favour.

After being admitted to the middling sized house, a maid led him to a room he knew was not the parlour.

Darcy halted in the threshold. In the carriage he had considered several potential scenarios should he encounter Elizabeth's brother-in-law, who, by rights, should be furious. Adenauer could be outraged and demand a duel or be grasping and scheme for a marriage. An unpleasant thought, that the man might abuse Elizabeth, occurred to Darcy, and in that moment he realised how unforgivably irresponsible he had been, indulging his wants. He should have wooed Elizabeth to the altar, but he had been selfish.

Grim, he bowed.

“My wife,” Robert Adenauer said, rising, “does not think I know her sister entered our home at an indiscreet hour this morning.” He shrugged. “I adore Jane, and my mother was a Frenchwoman. If Lizzy chooses to dally with matters of the heart, well. . .she is more than a woman grown.”

Darcy regarded the man in front of him warily, though some of his worry evaporated. This was not the demeanour of a man who would berate or beat his female relatives. Tall and lean with a head full of dark curls, he looked every inch the respectable but eccentric artist. Darcy had been prepared to deal with him eventually, but he had hoped to avoid speaking with Adenauer so soon.

He had never expected the half Frenchman to simply shrug his shoulders in the face of Elizabeth's. . .fall.

“But,” Robert continued, “knowing the delicate sensibilities of my wife, if I do not ask you what your intentions are, I know I shall not



be allowed to enjoy my customary marital felicity. So, Mr Darcy. Tell me something it would make my wife happy to hear.”

“Whether she is happy or not would depend on Miss Bennet,” he replied slowly. “Is she not at home?”

“No, she takes a walk in the park around this time every morning. I suppose she saw no reason to interrupt her routine.” Adenauer stared at Darcy from under heavy-lidded eyes. “I will tell you where, if you will not be so evasive.”

Darcy sighed. “I desire to wed her, if that is what you wish to hear. If you know Elizabeth, then you must allow that whatever I want or intend is not the issue.”

“Oh, yes. But it will soothe Jane to know that at least you were honourable.”

Darcy grimaced. He had been anything but honourable, but that would soon be remedied. He took his leave after Adenauer directed him to the park where Elizabeth took her morning walk. It was unfortunate that there was no conceivable excuse why he would be loitering in that area, but he supposed it would not matter if society came to know he had an interest in Elizabeth Bennet, if she would simply marry him. Perhaps this was the tact he should have taken a decade ago—seduce the woman into bed and then. . .he sighed. No—that might have backfired as well.

He would have to overcome whatever objections she placed in front of her heart as an obstacle.

He located her along one of the paths in the neighbourhood park and watched her for a while, trying to determine her potential mood and state of mind before revealing his presence. And found himself imagining that her young, dark haired charges were their own children.

The fierce yearning that welled up startled him enough that it was another while before he had recovered enough to hasten his walk and close the distance between them again. The two young children skipped several paces ahead of her, and every few moments she called out for them to pause and wait for her to catch up.

He scuffed his feet, and she glanced over her shoulder in reaction, paused, then turned away. He drew alongside her, close enough that he might lower his voice to shield their conversation better.

“Children, let us rest here awhile. Perhaps you can sketch the flowers in your books and when we return home, we will determine their variety.”

The pair crouched in front of a cluster of bright yellow flowers, pulling small sketchbooks out of the packs slung over their sides, and began to sketch.

“I found art so much more engaging as a child when we were

allowed to model our drawings after nature rather than the poor captured blooms in my mother's vases." She spoke calmly, her gaze trained on the children.

"They are very prettily behaved," he said, and meant the complement. "I would not be embarrassed were they mine." Darcy winced, hearing how pompous the words sounded as soon as they left his mouth.

Elizabeth glanced at him, eyes inscrutable, but said, "Thank you. Jane and I are determined to ensure they do not emulate their other aunts in demeanour. Robert spoils them hopelessly, of course, and undoes all our earnest effort."

Just last night those eyes had seared his skin with their heat, their passion. The phantom weight of her breasts sent a tingle through his fingers. His thighs clenched in reaction, recalling the demand of her legs wrapped around his weight as he pounded into her.

She had screamed his name.

Now she looked upon him almost as if he was a stranger.

But it pleased him she chose to take his words as a compliment rather than the start of another argument. Still, he must hedge his bets. "I do not mean to sound pompous. I see many a governess or nanny struggling in a park with young children."

"Hmm. One must keep their minds engaged, exert discipline, yet allow them a form of structured independence. They chafe at restraint, so the leading reins must be kept invisible. And they are goodnatured by birth on account of their mother. Though I am biased, of course."

"I, too, would be biased—on account of their aunt." His voice deepened, edged with some of his inner thoughts. *I know you, Elizabeth Bennet. Your mind, and now your body.*

She stilled, then looked away, shoulders stiff.

"Why did you not say goodbye?" he asked.

"It was rather an indiscreet hour."

Damnit, a park was not the place for this conversation. He needed her alone where he could needle her into losing her temper—and then they could deal with the real Elizabeth, and not this ruthlessly controlled lady at his side.

"I spoke with your brother-in-law."

"So I gathered, if you are here. But allow me to spare you the words which, knowing your character, must inevitably proceed forth."

"I would agree that the words I must say are inevitable, but for different reasons. I know my heart, Elizabeth. I wonder that you do not know yours."

She glanced at him, mouth quirking at one side. "What makes you think I do not?"

"You would not have lain with me on a whim."

She glanced around quickly. He almost did not care if anyone heard, but he cared enough. He would have no mark against his future wife's reputation. Still, his emotions led him down a reckless path. He must control himself.

"In fact," he continued in a lowered voice, "I would think last night was tantamount to a declaration from you. Or have I misjudged your character?"

"Tell me," she said as she watched the children, "if I became your wife—forgive me, but we are both well past the prevarication of youth—would I then be forced to give up my music?"

He stared at her, taken aback. "Do you mean would I forbid you from employment? I do not understand—my wife would have no need."

She turned to face him. "No need financially, no. But I enjoy the independence, Darcy. It is my money, my fate. My schedule is dictated on my whim."

"That is not the entire truth. You have yourself said you could not attend my sister because of prior engagements, which if cancelled, would affect the finances of your household."

"True. It is still independence, Darcy. I am not yoked to society any more than I wish. And I have purpose."

"Elizabeth, managing Pemberley and our children would be no lightweight duty. You would be well occupied, and there is nothing to prevent you from pursuing your music purely as enrichment. I have no desire to cage you."

"But there would be expectations of me."

"There are expectations of you now." He tamped down impatience. "Come, you are looking for obstacles where there are none other than your own stubbornness."

"Ah." She glanced at him sidelong, smirking a little. "The real Darcy comes out to play. I knew this careful, scrupulously polite doppelganger could not last long."

It was time to cut the chase and tree the prey. "Elizabeth, will you marry me? You would make me the happiest man in England and, by doing so, also preserve my honour."

Her brow arched. "You are not worried for my honour?"

"Elizabeth."

She sighed. "I must take the children home. It is time to turn them over to their nanny for lessons. And I must practice."

"Elizabeth."

A flash of emotion in her dark eyes broke through the terribly neutral mask of her smooth expression. "I will think about it, Darcy."

He wanted to argue but bit his tongue. This was progress. If he insisted, she would only flee. Darcy bowed. "When may I see you

again?"

"I will come to you when I am ready."

The silence held weight, fire.

"Do not make me wait too long, Elizabeth. I must have you again.  
Do you understand? After last night, I will never let you go."

## Chapter 10

"I asked her to marry me," Darcy said abruptly.

Georgiana stared at him, her expression blank for a moment. Dinner this evening was a broody affair, his sister no doubt entangled in her own concerns, and content to let him be.

"Her response?" she asked finally.

"She says she will think about it."

"That is a vast improvement over last time."

Darcy snorted, setting down his fork. He had no appetite, and people who toyed with their food annoyed him. Either eat or do not. Fussing table manners only betrayed a weak mind.

Georgiana's demeanour brightened. "It is a vast improvement. We must build upon it. What was her reason for requiring thought?"

"She says she will miss the independence of plying her trade as a musician."

"She said no such thing."

He lifted a hand, flicking his fingers in irritation. "I am paraphrasing for the sake of brevity."

Georgiana coughed. "Hmm. Well. . .I believe I understand. In her current state she is allowed to indulge her passion as well as earn her own income, which she controls as an unwed woman."

"I do not want her pin money, Georgiana!" He wanted the woman, even more now than before. He gripped the edge of the table. Inhaling abruptly, he recalled the silk of her skin under his palms. Her throaty moans and the heat between her thighs as he slipped inside.

Darcy grit his teeth, forcing his body under control.

"No, of course not," Georgiana was saying. "What you must do is prove you do not disdain her. . .accomplishment. I applaud her, you know. She is a modern woman. Sometimes I wish—"

He looked at her in concern, not yet so far gone he could not hear the note of wistfulness in his sister's voice. "What is troubling you? What do you wish?" Dear God, let it not be that she was crossed in love. Thus far she had refused to wed. . .he would kill any man who toyed with her.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I think I know just the thing. I shall pay a call to a particular friend of mine, and by the end of the day tomorrow, Adenauer pianos will be all the fashion. And you, as well, Brother. It is about time you used the influence you have for

something productive, rather than allowing it to wilt on the vine.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Just do as I say; do not concern yourself with sense. I am a woman; I know how she should be wooed.”



Elizabeth removed her wrap, handing it off to the maid to stow away. Having come from her second daily walk, she desired nothing more than a hearty tea. The streets of London were not the fields and woods of her childhood home, but they were bracing enough if exercise was one's goal. In the back of her mind, she allowed the whisper that the forests of Pemberley would be hers, and her children's, if only she accepted Darcy's offer.

Her eyes closed. A subtle pulse between her thighs proved her body had not forgotten. It had taken every ounce of will to restrain herself, to present him a cool mien. Every ounce of will to walk away that morning when all she desired was him. His arms around her, his mouth on her skin. His hardness in her body.

She could have him every night she desired, if only she accepted his offer.

And if not exactly a romantic proposal, it had not been insincere. Only a madwoman would not grasp the opportunity to wed the man she loved—especially if he was a man of fortune. She had always thought of herself as a decent woman, but what decent woman hesitated to wed the man she had given husbandly rights to?

“Lizzy, there is a new order,” Jane said with a happy glow on her face. “I have only just returned from the shop.”

“Which model?”

“His best, and we have a lead on a second order this month for the same. Two in a month!”

“A coup.” Pleasure suffused her. Lady Cresilde's gathering must have netted more fish than Elizabeth had hoped. Of course, her showing at the Darcy townhouse was not to be discounted. If she were honest, her connection with the vivacious Georgiana and her dashing brother likely raised Elise Benichou's standing more than Elizabeth Bennet would care to admit.

“Two commissions,” she murmured. “A coup, indeed.”

“Yes, if business continues to go so well, Robert will be able to fund the new location he has been eyeing these last few years.”

Elizabeth smiled, pleased at their fortune. If she wed Darcy, it would not be because she was destitute and the only other life open to her one of drudgery. No, she would wed him as an independent woman—if not with means, then at least with options. Which meant

they could enter into matrimony as equals. Having one's husband aware he had saved his wife from penury simply by wedding her. . she grimaced. No, that was not the fate she desired.

Darcy respected her need for distance, physical at least. He did not call, but he wrote, nearly every day. After the first letter she gave in and wrote him back. And over the week they developed a correspondence that allowed her to recall the charming, if reticent, highly intelligent man she had fallen in love with. Twice she found herself traveling in the direction of his townhome and stopped, not quite ready. No matter how her body ached, no matter how her dreams refused to allow her to escape their single night together.

*When will you accept me, Elizabeth?* He wrote. *When will you banish our longing and settle us into the marital felicity we both crave and richly—at least I—deserve?*

Inexplicably, over the same period of time the family fortunes increased, so much so that over the supper table, the three adults stared at one another, perplexed. Robert, having returned home for the meal, entered with such a bemused mien the two women could not help but ask him what was the matter.

He scratched his temple, pushing his messy curls out of his eyes, and sat at the table. "Well, it is just that we have another three commissions. For our top line model."

"But that is wonderful news!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

Robert squinted at her. "Yes, yes, but if I do not know what has caused such a precipitous increase in our fortunes, I have no means of duplicating the events."

Her lips pursed. He was correct. The temporary increase in business was lovely, but if they could not determine the circumstances, then they could not work to repeat the uptick in the future.

"Someone must have said something," Jane said, passing the serving platters. "Or perhaps a mention in the pages. Robert, do you have—ah."

He was already rising from his seat, bounding through the door and down the hall to his study. Returning in a matter of moments, he clutched a newspaper in his hand. Handing it to Jane, he took his seat and began his meal.

Elizabeth did not touch her plate, her gaze on her sister, whose eyes flickered back and forth as she read. Jane looked up, an odd look on her face.

"I was right. Well."

"What?" Robert asked, pausing to swallow his food. "Do not be mysterious."

"There is a paragraph only about Miss Darcy's soiree the other

night, but there is a quote from Mr Darcy complimenting Adenauer pianos and Miss Benichou's exquisite playing. He says he will have no other piano in his townhome from now on and would be delighted to hear Miss Benichou play every night of the week."

Elizabeth felt faint. Jane and Robert's eyes fixed on her. Jane's wide, and Robert struggling to conceal a smirk.

"It sounds as if Mr Darcy is far more clever in his means of seduction than we gave him credit," he said.

"Husband!" Jane exclaimed. "Talk like that with the children present."

He shrugged a shoulder. "Partially French children, my dear."

"They are English, and I will have no unseemly speech at the dinner table."

Elizabeth hid a smile by taking a bite of her meal. Jane could not even scold her husband, so sweet was her temperament, even after years of marriage and children. Exasperation was the angriest emotion her elder sister could muster.

Their discourse had given her a moment to recover. "I would say I am certain his remarks have nothing to do with me, but I abhor false modesty," she said, then sighed. "Robert . . . we cannot accept the commissions."

Her brother-in-law snorted. "Perhaps you cannot, but I certainly can. If the man desires to send you a dozen such tokens of his affection, well, then, I say hurrah to a long courtship."

Jane gave her spouse a reproving look. "I will ignore your shameless encouragement for Elizabeth to toy with a gentleman's affections merely to raise the fortunes of this family."

"Oh, she will wed him eventually. We shall consider it a bride price."

Elizabeth choked, took a sip of water, and cleared her throat. "Really, you say the most outlandish things. I should be vexed you are willing to sell me so cheaply."

He grinned at her. "Not cheaply at all, dear Sister. Adenauer's top of the line pianos are not cheap!"

He was incorrigible, and she would not waste her emotions being annoyed with him. The sisters exchanged a resigned look, however.

"What will you do, Lizzy?" Jane asked.

Elizabeth sighed. "I will finish eating. And then perhaps I will take time and come to a decision regarding his proposal."

"Sister." Robert looked at her now with an uncharacteristically stern slant to his mouth. "There is nothing to consider. You know the decent thing to do now is to wed."

Struggling not to blush, she looked away.

"Robert—" Jane began.



“No, Janie. Mr Darcy has done the honourable thing and given her an offer which saves me considerable trouble, I might say. This dance between them is amusing and all, but in the end, we must, the three of us, have an understanding the end result will be a wedding.”

“If she does not love him—”

“Well, that fish has escaped the net now, has it not? Let them court, let her lead the man a merry chase to fuel her memories once he grows corpulent and placid, but there must be a wedding. Your father would agree with me.”

And their mother would already be in vapours.

“I will speak with him,” Elizabeth said, bowing her head and trying to sound resigned when really her heart gave a little leap of joy.

## Chapter 11

She was not a foolish woman. She did not expect a warm reception, not precisely. He had not written in the two days it had taken her to gather her courage, and she feared his fervour was wearing away and he was rethinking his attentions. Any man would resent a lack of enthusiasm shown his proposal. She hoped Darcy was self-possessed enough to overcome his annoyance forthwith, however, as she was a woman given to thinking thoroughly through her decisions.

Elizabeth paused. Thinking thoroughly through. . .hmmm. As she waited to be escorted into Darcy's presence, she played with words in her mind. It allowed her to avoid acknowledging her nervousness.

"Miss Bennet," a cultured feminine voice said.

Elizabeth turned towards a side door. Upon arrival, the butler had escorted her to this small, well-appointed chamber to wait. She had declined an offer of refreshment, amused as always by how seriously the Darcy staff took themselves. They wore their pride creased into their livery. Not an overbearing kind of pride—it was a good sign of well treatment to observe staff so eager to perform their duties—but the kind of pride that made Elizabeth realize she was barely a social step above these ruthlessly dignified people. They would never be chilly towards a guest of the Darcy's, but if they knew Miss Bennet was also Miss Benichou. . .well, she might receive a request to knock at the side entrance from now on.

Ridiculous. Shunting aside her insecurities, Elizabeth curtsied. "Miss Darcy. I was not aware you were at home."

"My brother is out," Georgiana said, advancing into the room. She wore a charmingly simple morning dress, though it was obvious her clothes were not done over gowns from an elder sister or aunt.

"I see. I had desired to speak with Mr Darcy, but I will call another time." It was better not to leave a letter; some things must be said in person.

Georgiana stared at her, then shook her head. "Why are you toying with my brother's heart, Miss Bennet?"

Startled, Elizabeth paused to craft a sensible reply. She had never been accused by any person of toying, ever. Such behaviour was for Lydia or Kitty before their married days. . .well, even now Lydia was not above a bit of flirtation if her letters were to be believed.

"I take it you know of Mr Darcy's sentiments?" He had always been

close to his sister, Elizabeth knew. However, she did not wish to accidentally disclose the offer if he had not already done so.

“Yes, I know my brother asked you to marry him and you have not given an outright refusal. Though why a lady in your situation would hesitate, I am uncertain.”

“My situation, Miss Darcy?” Elizabeth injected a dollop of droll humour in her tone, though her heart rate increased. She was not quite so independent of society that she desired it be generally known that she and Darcy had spent an evening together. Servants talked, and what servants knew, soon their mistresses would also know. Elizabeth could not afford to be shunned.

She comforted herself with the belief that Georgiana only wanted what was best for her brother. Linking Darcy’s name to a ruined Bennet woman would not be good for him at all.

Georgiana tilted her head. “Do not make me say it, Miss Bennet. We are both women of this world, and I think you understand my meaning. Let us say that I am displeased to have my brother’s honour called into question.”

“Has someone done so?”

“Not as yet. But you must know such secrets are never secret for long. There is only one remedy.”

“Would you not prefer his happiness over the preservation of his reputation?” If Georgiana noted Elizabeth denied nothing, it did not matter. Neither of them, it seemed, was prone to playing games with words or lies. Elizabeth shook her head and lifted a hand. “No, I did not come here to bandy words with you or with Darcy. I . . . came to discuss my acceptance of his offer.”

The younger woman’s entire countenance bloomed. She clasped her hands. “Oh, finally you demonstrate your good sense! We are soon to be sisters.”

Elizabeth could not help but smile. “I think perhaps we should wait until we know that Mr Darcy has not rescinded his offer.”

Georgiana’s expression soured. “He has not. He is not in town. He was called away to Pemberley suddenly to deal with an issue that arose.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank. Now that it mattered, and her mind was all but made up—all she needed was a word of reassurance, an ardent look in his eye to give her courage—he was gone.

“I see. Well, we have waited all these years, I suppose a few more months is no matter. I shall—”

“Absolutely not.” Georgiana stamped her foot. “I am taking you to Pemberley. I abhor star-crossed lovers’ stories.”

Elizabeth stared. Surely she was too old for stomping feet. “I am uncertain of my current commitments and whether—”

Blue eyes, so like her brother's, hardened to iron. "I will not take 'no' for an answer."

Their gazes clashed, but Elizabeth was the first to look away. "Very well. I suppose we should get this done and over with once and for all. If he has lost interest, at least we will have closure."

Miss Darcy nodded. "Good. I will make arrangements."



Georgiana left for Pemberley a day ahead of Elizabeth. *To prevent my brother from taking any more unexpected trips, she told Elizabeth in a brief letter. Enclosed are arrangements I have taken the liberty to manage on your behalf. You need not distress yourself in one of those public hired coaches. I look forward to seeing you at home.*

Jane hugged her on the morning she left, a little concerned over Elizabeth travelling alone, but the coach was clearly from Pemberley. She had packed with care, not quite with the air of a bride preparing her trousseau, but close enough. Fussing over dresses and gloves and underthings gave her something to think upon other than her growing worry over Darcy's silence.

By the time the journey was nearly to a close, she had worked herself into a state of nerves.

Darcy could have any lady he wanted to wife, Elizabeth told herself over and over. She smoothed her hands down her thighs, attempting to allow the peace of the passing scenery to seep into her poor, clammy soul. Really, this state of mind was intolerable. She was no schoolgirl or giddy debutante. Nor was she a maiden aunt. Elizabeth Bennet had taken her place as a woman of the world. An artist of independent means and free thinking.

She knew, however, that if she looked into his eyes and saw coldness, indifference, or chagrin, it would maim her heart forever. Oh, she would not die from the loss of his affection. She would be able to move on and find contentment in her life. But a part of her would always yearn, always regret.

The carriage pulled up to the front doors. As a footman assisted her to exit, she glanced around. It was just as she remembered, but these estates changed little over time, anchoring the families that mastered them.

Already expected, Georgiana met Elizabeth in the foyer, reaching out to clasp her hands. "Elizabeth, I am so happy you have come. You would like to refresh yourself from the journey, of course. Dinner is in two hours which gives you just enough time."

"Yes, thank you."

Georgiana squeezed her hands, lowering her voice. "He is out

riding. He does not know you have come. I thought it better that way."

Elizabeth stared at her, aghast. "But when we discussed it, you said you would inform him. He despises surprises." She ignored the fact that she herself had been too much the coward to write him and inform him she was coming. It would have given him time to reject her.

"Yes, yes, but I know what is best. I did not want to give him time to arm himself."

"Am I so fierce an opponent then?" she muttered.

"You are the woman he loves."

The words were a thin whisper, but Elizabeth heard them clearly. Georgiana was so convinced, so utterly certain of Darcy's affections. Elizabeth hoped with everything in herself it was not merely the whimsy of a younger sister.



Elizabeth was escorted down to dinner, each step increasing her nervousness. Odd, really. She was nearly convinced of Darcy's regard, but accepting him would mean a radical change in her life, for the second time.

When her parents passed away within months of each other, and Jane wed, all in the heartbreaking months following her argument with Darcy, there had been little time to grieve. Little time to process her emotions. Survival became the goal, and thus she had thrown herself headlong into the scheme to perfect her musical skills. How had the idea come to her in the first place? Some passing newspaper article, a book? She could not recall now.

These past years with Jane and Robert had been happy ones, despite the ache of missing something.

The ache of missing Darcy. The ache of missing the children she should have had, the babes their own she might have held in her own arms.

Elizabeth stopped short when she entered a small drawing room. Darcy stood with his back to her, a glass in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other.

"I thought you were ill," he said without turning around, tone of voice distracted.

"I feel quite well, Mr Darcy," she said.

He whirled, the amber liquid in his glass sloshing over his hand. Elizabeth could not help the small, satisfied smile that curved her lips. She would treasure the memory of startling Fitzwilliam Darcy for the rest of her days.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

It was a reasonable question. Not quite the welcome she had hoped for, but not an outright rejection.

Still, his wary neutrality irked her. “If you are not pleased to see me, I will retire. Good evening, sir.” She curtsied and started to turn.

“Do not play games with me, Elizabeth Bennet. You will not win.”

She paused, facing him again. There was no threat in the familiar deepening of his voice. But there was a promise. She recognized the sign of his temper preparing to break free.

She squared her shoulders. “Your sister convinced me to come and see you. I called in London and you were not home.”

He still did not approach, simply watched her, albeit more calmly now that she was not moving towards the door.

“I thought it best I remove myself from London,” he said. “To give you time to come to your own decision. I did not trust myself to continue to behave so placidly.”

The word recalled Robert’s earlier admonishment. Elizabeth choked back laughter. Corpulent and placid, indeed.

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, voice turning icy. “Do I amuse you?”

“No, no, it is not you, rather something someone said to me. . .” This was not helping. Dragging out the inevitable was for the weak. “If your offer is still open, I would like to accept.”

There. The words were said, and if he decided to turn from her now, at least she would not spend the rest of her life regretting the what-ifs. She would listen to him gently let her down, curtsy and exit with quiet dignity and return to London forthwith.

“Come here,” he said. “Elizabeth.”

After a brief hesitation, she approached. Darcy set his papers and glass on a nearby table and waited until she was within arms reach. His arms slid around her waist, pulling her against his body.

But his hold was still loose, nearly tentative. “Be certain,” he said. “I will not let you go a second time.”

“We hardly know each other.”

“We know enough. And we have the rest of our lives to court. If you are certain.”

She lifted a hand to his face, fingertips touching his cheek. “I am certain. We have some things to negotiate in terms of my music, but I. . .” she closed her eyes, then opened them with renewed determination. “I do love you. I never stopped loving you.”

“If I have never said it before,” was his quiet reply, “you are the keeper of my heart. My honour, and my life. Marry me, Elizabeth?”

Her arms twined around his neck as his head lowered. “Yes,” she said, right before he sealed her acceptance with a sweet kiss.





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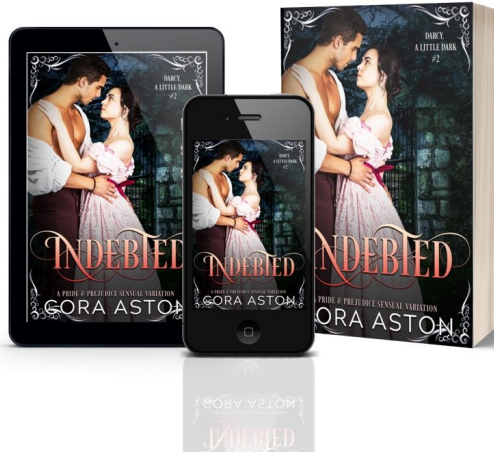
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### CHAPTER ONE

*Pride, Prejudice. . .and vengeance.*



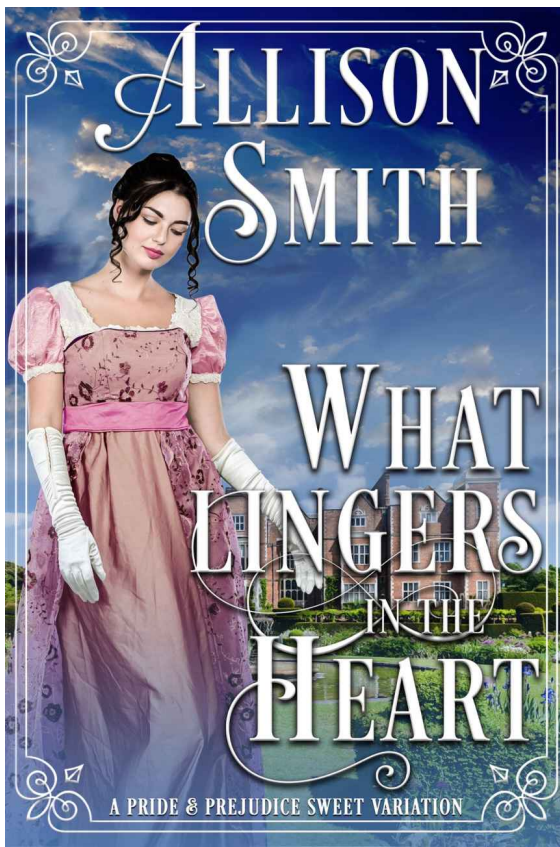
**A careless whisper. A shattered trust. Will Darcy choose love. .  
or vengeance?**

Elizabeth's secret hopes for an offer from Mr. Darcy are shattered when gossip spreads like wildfire through Meryton, branding Miss Georgiana a compromised woman at the hands of George Wickham. There is only one person entrusted by Darcy with his sister's secret—Elizabeth Bennett.

Lizzy's fierce pride forbids she continue to plead her innocence. She would never betray Georgiana, but if Darcy does not know her better than that by now, then he never will.

Bruised pride and a broken heart must be set aside when a threat to Georgiana spurs Elizabeth into action. Placing herself in harms way, she is faced with utter, foul ruin. . .unless Darcy can reach her in time and rescue her from the blackguards set to sell her virtue, and possibly her life.

**CHAPTER ONE**



*Do you enjoy sweet variations?*

**Darcy's secret longing for a woman who will not have him. Elizabeth's determination to marry for love, and not money. An epic battle of wills...who will win and who will wed?**

## About the Author

I suppose I should talk about myself in the third person, but I'm not going to. (Smile.) I'm a wife, a mother of four, and a lifelong tinkerer. I've dabbled in many different crafts and hobbies including jewelry making, baking, sewing, drawing.... And, of course, I am a lifetime avid reader of romance.

Escaping into the 'simpler' time of Jane Austen when gentlemen were required to court a lady with marriage in mind, and we didn't have to wheedle our daughter's into ditching the ripped black goth jeans in favor of a skirt....sigh. Bliss, right?

I've also always loved to write, and now I am combining two of my joys and hoping to share them with you. Like everything worth doing, this is a journey, and I'm happy to share it with you.

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